MY INSTANT DEATH ABILITY IS SO OVERPOWERED
14
Author:
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CHARACTERS

Tomochika Dannoura

High School Year 2. Although she looks quite attractive and has quite the ample chest, her role is unfortunately that of the Straight Man. Like Yogiri, she did not receive the power of the Gift, but she is trained in a martial art derived from the ancient Dannoura style of archery.

Yogiri Takatou

High School Year 2. Although he seemed unmotivated and was always sleeping in school, when he gets serious, he is surprisingly attractive. He didn't receive the Gift, the special power of this world, but he already had the power of Instant Death from his original world. Also known as AΩ.

Asaka Takatou

A female college student who, while struggling to find work, ended up taking an interview at a suspicious institution known as the Independent Higher Life Form Research Facility, and unfortunately ended up finding work there. She normally ties her long hair up behind her head. At her new work place, she met AΩ, whom she named Yogiri.

Mokomoko Dannoura

Tomochika's ancestor and guardian spirit. As a ghost from the Heian era, she was the one responsible for reviving the Dannoura School of Archery...or so she says. She looks exactly like Tomochika's older sister (in that she's fat), and wears a kimono in the fashion of the Heian-era nobility. Apparently, she is well acquainted with digital technology.

Carol S. Lane

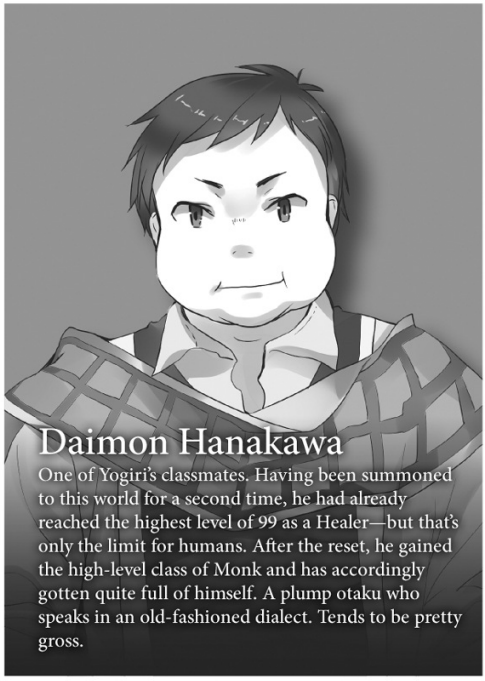
One of Yogiri's classmates. An American who joined their class as she entered high school. Like Ryouko, she was tasked with monitoring Yogiri, but she works for the Agency. Her class in this world is Ninja, and she wears a red ninja outfit and forehead protector when fighting. Her weapon is a ninja sword.

Ryouko Ninomiya

One of Yogiri's classmates. Actually, she was dispatched by the research facility that had hidden him to watch Yogiri. She has a tool designed to monitor him installed on her smartphone. Though she was a ninja back home, in this world her class is Samurai. She fights in a traditional Samurai's garb with two swords.

Kouryu

One of the old gods who was defeated and driven out by Malnarilna. As the last survivor of the fallen dragons, he uses the name of his race as his own name. He usually takes the form of a young boy but can also become an Eastern dragon. Taking advantage of Yogiri, he was able to eliminate Malnarilna and gain control of the world again.



Daimon Hanakawa

One of Yogiri's classmates. Having been summoned to this world for a second time, he had already reached the highest level of 99 as a Healer—but that's only the limit for humans. After the reset, he gained the high-level class of Monk and has accordingly gotten quite full of himself. A plump otaku who speaks in an old-fashioned dialect. Tends to be pretty gross.

CHARACTERS

Hiruko

A god and an Aggressor who forced her way into this world. Using another Aggressor known as the Wolf King, she was looking for her mother, Luu. She previously traveled with Yogiri to help restore Luu's missing memories, but she's stuck with Luu since the reset.

Luu

A goddess created when the Philosopher's Stones that Yogiri's group collected fused together. She started as a baby, but after fusing with seven stones took on the appearance of a twelve-year-old. After that, she merged with another version of herself born from other stones fusing together, but apparently, that was all a dream. After the reset, she obtained the form of a twenty-year-old.

The Great Sage Mitsuki

On the surface, Malnarilna is the god of this world, and the Sages rule over it. In reality, Mitsuki is far above them, even capable of resetting the world and making the past seem like it was only a dream. Van's grandfather, though his appearance is that of a stunningly handsome youth.

Sage Van

One of the Sages who "defends" this world. Unlike Sion, he is the Great Sage's grandson by blood. He has the power to create games and enforce their rules in real life, but he only has one running at present. After the reset, he got Yogiri involved in his game, Cavern Quest.

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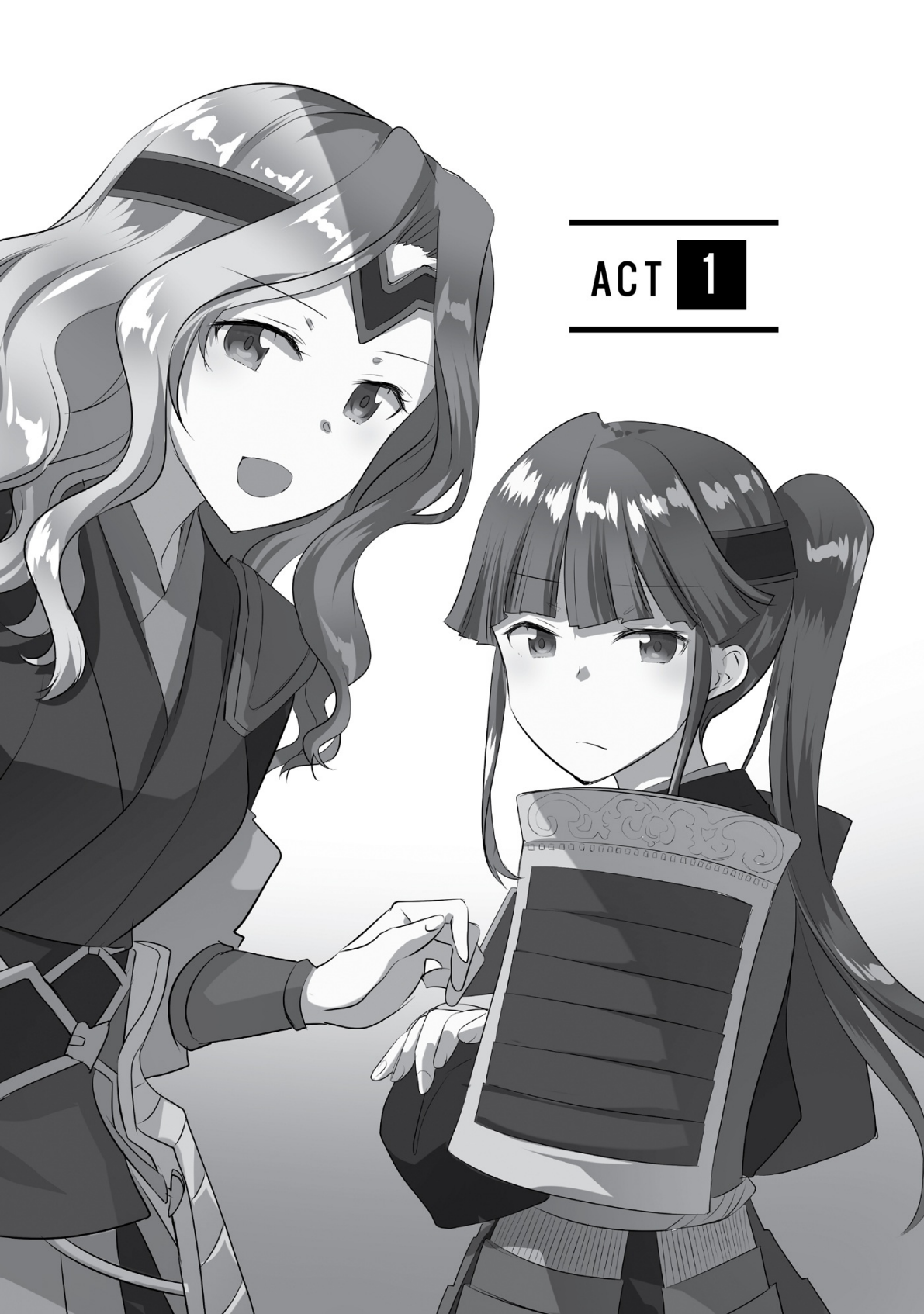
ACT 1

Chapter 1 — That's the Biggest Shock You've Had since Coming to This World, Huh?

Cavern Quest, the stage for Sage Van's latest game. As its name suggested, it was supposed to occur underground; however it was divided into two general areas: a city where players prepared for their adventures, and the fields where those adventures took place. Many copies of the same city existed, each referred to by a number and called a different "channel." Fields were mostly treated the same way, but there were some exceptions.

One such exception was the Castle in the Sky field. As the area of the game's final objective, there was only one. No matter what channel a player found themselves in, if they wished to challenge Lasbo, the final boss of the game, they had to come here.

The field was a small island divided into four areas. The first, where players arrived, was called the Entrance Area. This made up most of the island and consisted of a beach and a forest. Next was the Prison Area, the enormous pyramid situated at the center of the island. Supposedly, there were two areas beyond the pyramid, but the details were yet unknown. The area Yogiri and Tomochika had reached at the top of the pyramid, styled like a shrine, apparently served as the gateway to the next area.

Van sat lazily on the altar in the center of the shrine, while Yogiri, Tomochika, the dragon Atila, and the dog Dai stood facing him from the shrine's entrance, still wearing the equipment given to them by the Great Sage. Yogiri was decked out head to toe in black, while Tomochika had an extremely revealing outfit reminiscent of a demoness commander. Even Atila wore black clothing, while Dai was equipped with black armor. It seemed the theme was that they belonged to some sort of evil army.

"Okay, so I get we're supposed to be fighting, but what should we actually do?"

Yogiri and Tomochika were looking for a way back to their home world and needed a number of Philosopher's Stones. They had thought gathering enough

stones would allow them to revive the goddess Luu, but she had already revived and left, and was making no effort to reunite with them. That being the case, there didn't seem much reason for them to stay in Cavern Quest, so they planned on clearing the game and escaping, but it didn't seem that plan was going well either.

They'd thought all they needed to do was defeat Lasbo, but Van had just told them no such boss existed. The Lasbo fight was supposed to be a battle between the seven groups that arrived with their Philosopher's Stones.

"Like I said, take any of those weapons you like. You can then go through the door in the back to get to the Antechamber Area. There's nothing special to do there; it's just a waiting room. Once all the challengers arrive, you'll move to the Arena," Van said, still sulking.

Mounted on the walls of the shrine were seven weapons: a sword, bow, staff, spear, dagger, axe, and shield.

"If you're going to be so sloppy about it, do we really need the weapons?"

"You don't have to take one if you don't want to." The weapons may have had special properties, but Yogiri didn't feel like dealing with the extra weight.

"You said there's now over a hundred parties coming, right? What are you going to do about it?"

Van's initial plan had been a battle royale between seven parties, but somehow the number of Philosopher's Stones had multiplied, vastly increasing the number of possible participants.

"Hmm. What about changing it to a tournament? If all the matches happen at the same time, we'll lose half the participants each round, so it shouldn't take too long."

"What kind of game is it if you're making these decisions on the fly?" Tomochika sighed.

"Just to be sure, if we win this tournament, that counts as beating the game and we can leave, right?" Yogiri asked.

"If you clear the game, you can have any wish granted. If that wish is to leave the game, then sure."

For now, they had no choice but to believe him. If he wasn't true to his word, they'd have to deal with it when it happened.

"What counts as winning in the tournament, though?" Yogiri asked again. "I'm not really fond of the idea of fighting to the death."

"Well, normally it would be decided by one of the participants dying, but I suppose if someone surrenders, that counts."

Yogiri felt a little relieved to hear that. There may not have been many people who would be willing to surrender, but at least that gave them room to negotiate.

"Ah! Didn't the Great Sage say he was going to give us some kind of power?" Tomochika suddenly blurted out. Yogiri hadn't heard it himself, but apparently the Great Sage had announced that the first ten people to reach the final area of Cavern Quest would receive any power they wanted.

"No clue. That was gramps's idea, right? I don't know anything about it."

"I see. I was wondering what kind of people you were. You seem awfully brazen."

At some point, another boy appeared beside Van, speaking like he had been there all along. Yogiri was surprised by his appearance, not because of how sudden it was, but because of how natural it seemed for him to be there.

"Gramps!" Van exclaimed, elated. Though he had been sulking until now, the moment the Great Sage was before him, Van's spirits immediately lifted.

"So you're the Great Sage?" Yogiri had assumed that the Great Sage would be some old man, judging by the fact he was supposed to be Van's grandfather, but the boy in front of him actually looked younger than Van. Normally that would be strange, but in a world where magic and supernatural powers like the Gift abounded, he supposed a person's appearance couldn't be that hard to change.

"That's kind of an embarrassing name, but I did organize all of the Sages, so I guess it's true. This is the first time we've talked, right? I'm Mitsuki. Nice to meet you." He had once sent a message to everyone in the world at once, but Yogiri hadn't heard it.

"'Nice to meet you'?" Yogiri frowned. "You realize how much trouble you've caused us, right?" Mitsuki was directly responsible for everyone in the world targeting him. Though he hadn't directly harmed them, Yogiri wasn't exactly interested in being friendly with him.

"That's easy for you to say. But do you realize how much trouble you've caused *me*?"

If he was talking about the damage Yogiri had done to the world, Yogiri felt like he was blaming the wrong guy. "You guys are the ones who brought me here. All I've been doing is trying to get home."

"Your behavior still seems excessive to me...but that's fine. Everything will work out in the end. As for your question about the powers, didn't I already give you yours?"

“Oh yeah! These clothes are your fault!” Tomochika shouted. It had seemed like she’d grown accustomed to her outfit, but apparently she still held a bit of a grudge.

Mitsuki looked back at her in shock.

“What’s wrong, gramps?” asked Van.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just, this is the first time a girl has reacted normally to me. I thought it was weird.”

“Now that you mention it, most girls do get pretty flustered when they see you, don’t they?”

“Jeez, talk about being confident in your appearance! It’s almost scary!” Though Tomochika could admit that he was good-looking, that didn’t engender any particular feelings in her.

“I’ve always been pretty popular. Young and old, men and women, people of all races seem to like me... See, exactly like that.”

Yogiri turned to follow Mitsuki’s gaze to find Atila and Dai staring at him, spellbound.

“Hey!”

Despite Tomochika’s shout, Atila dropped to her knees while Dai trotted over, snuggling up to Mitsuki with his tail wagging in a frenzy.

Is this some sort of cuckolding?!

“I’m pretty sure that’s not it!” Tomochika exclaimed. “He may be good-looking, but isn’t it weird to like him so much when you’ve only just met him?!”

“That kind of hurts. You might be the first person I’ve ever met who didn’t like me from the start,” Mitsuki answered, his words belied by the expression of intense curiosity on his face.

Is that an “interesting woman detected” expression I see? asked the Dannoura guardian spirit, Mokomoko.

“Too bad I’m not interested in him at all!”

“Does he not affect you, Mokomoko?” Yogiri asked.

I suppose not. Perhaps it is due to my lack of a physical body.

However, having two of his current companions throw themselves at the Great Sage’s feet like that left Yogiri feeling a little unhappy. He immediately assumed it was some sort of charm or mental control.

“What did you do to them?”

“I didn’t do anything. This is just the kind of person I am. They’re doing this of their own accord, so even if you ask me to give them back, there’s not much I can do.”

“Are you really happy sticking with him, Atila?” Yogiri asked.

“How could I ever be his enemy?! You two are the ones acting strange here!”

Dai responded with a whine. It was hard to tell how he felt, but it almost seemed like he was apologizing, though he made no move to leave Mitsuki’s side.

“No way...” They had met Dai during Cavern Quest, so they hadn’t really spent all that much time with him. But to have a dog he liked so much turn his back on him so easily, even the usually stalwart Yogiri felt hurt.

“That’s the biggest shock you’ve had since coming to this world, huh?”

To be fair, he liked that dog enough to prioritize its life over Hanakawa’s... Then again, that may have just been because he would prioritize anyone over Hanakawa.

“I thought if gramps was showing up, that meant everything was over, but it looks like that’s not the case.” Van said, apparently surprised. He expected meeting Mitsuki would have Yogiri and Tomochika on their knees as well, basically resolving everything on the spot.

“I’m glad that Yogiri didn’t take a liking to me. I don’t like killing the people who love me.”

“Have you considered just killing me directly?”

“That’s a last resort. I’d rather enjoy the situation as it is for now.” It appeared the Great Sage thought he could kill Yogiri whenever he pleased. He was powerful enough to reset this entire world on a whim. He probably figured he could set everything right in the end.

“If Dai leaves our party, that technically means that we don’t have a Philosopher’s Stone anymore. Can we still participate in the Lasbo fight?” Yogiri asked.

“At this point, gramps would be upset if you didn’t participate, so I’ll just let you in anyway,” Van replied.

“You really don’t have any rules for this, do you?!” Tomochika snapped.

Van continued. “It’ll be a nuisance if you run into the other participants in here, so can you hurry up and move to the next area?”

“That means we won’t have to wait too long, right?” Yogiri asked. “You did say there were over a hundred parties.”

“Once we have a good number, I’ll cut off the new entries. I don’t want to make gramps wait too long.”

“True,” Mitsuki added. “Half a day is probably a good enough time limit, don’t you think?”

“I think so.” Van nodded before turning back to Yogiri. “It’s pretty comfortable inside, so go ahead and relax.”

“I don’t know if we’ll be doing much relaxing...” Tomochika muttered.

Once they finished Cavern Quest, they’d be sent back to the surface. They still hadn’t found a way to get back home, so they’d have to start the search anew. Though time had been reset, it still felt like they had spent a great deal of time in this world. At this point, Yogiri was starting to get frustrated about not having a surefire way of getting home.

“Okay, let’s go, then.”

“Just the two of us, though, huh? Feels kind of lonely,” Tomochika replied, throwing a glance at Atila and Dai.

Yogiri looked as well, but there was no sign of the two accompanying them further.

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Yogiri and Tomochika passed through the door at the back of the shrine. Beyond it was the Antechamber Area, a waiting room of sorts with multiple rooms set up for each party. That was where they’d be waiting until the final battle started.

“It’s pretty rare for you to go out like this, isn’t it?” Van said. As far as he remembered, he had never seen Mitsuki leave his home before. He could laze away in his home and still keep tabs on the whole world, so there wasn’t much need for him to go anywhere.

“I can watch from anywhere, but I feel like being actually here will make it feel more real.”

Van couldn’t help but feel embarrassed at that. It was like he was saying none of Van’s games until now had been worth his attention. That said, the fact that Cavern Quest *had* caught his interest was a considerable achievement. The current situation may have been mostly a coincidence, but if it helped Mitsuki kill some time, Van was happy enough to call it a success.

“So, you’ll be here for a while, then—”

Before he could finish speaking, Van was cut off by a tremendous impact. The sudden blast sent him flying and left him in total disarray. For a brief moment he blacked out, and when he came to, the pyramid was no more than a tiny triangle in the distance. He had been thrown an incredible distance. Using his magic, he managed to bring himself to a stop.

“What was that?!”

Still bewildered, he made his way back to the pyramid. The majority of the shrine at the top of the pyramid was now gone. Naturally, the Great Sage was still standing there unharmed, but the girl and the dog at his side were gone. Either they had been blown away like Van had, or they’d been totally annihilated. At the very least, the armor Mitsuki had given them had clearly been unable to protect them.

A bizarre figure stood in front of the Great Sage. It looked mostly human, but there was clearly something wrong with it. In simple terms, it looked like some kind of chimera. Though it had a humanoid shape, it seemed to be made of a mixture of various animals, plants, and minerals.

“How did it get inside?” Van wondered aloud as he landed beside his grandfather. Anyone could join Cavern Quest by saying the keyword, but that should have been the only way inside. The only ones who could get into the game without permission were the Great Sage and his secretary, Alexia. Checking the player list, Van couldn’t find an ID associated with this creature. That meant, as far as Van was concerned, this was an illegitimate participant.

“I didn’t expect to get attacked the moment I stepped outside,” Mitsuki sighed, laughter in his voice.

Chapter 2 — If You Had Said Something Pathetic, I Would Have Just Put You Out of Your Misery

In a vague sort of way, Ein understood the world to be a fair place. Some people enjoyed extreme wealth while others languished in poverty, some suffered under the oppression of Demon Lords, and some lived in a state of constant starvation, but in the end, all of these were foreign ideas to him. As long as they didn't happen to him, he didn't care much about them.

His own family had been driven out of their town and, unable to find proper work, forced into bare subsistence by hunting for their own food, but even that was a rather peaceful way of living, at least for a while.

Going out to hunt something was easy enough, but actually bringing back something to eat could be a challenge. Normally, if he failed to find food, he'd have to go into town and buy something to eat. He was out hunting in the first place because that wasn't really an option, but neither could he bear to let his little sister starve.

As the sun set, he walked through the forest, dejected. He knew full well how dangerous the forest was at night, so he should have gone into town as quickly as possible, but still he dragged his feet.

The edge of the forest ahead of him seemed strangely bright. The sun was setting behind him, so there was no way it was just the light of sunset, but he didn't think anything about it was strange either. Maybe his peaceful life had dulled his senses, as the thought that his way of life might be threatened by this odd event didn't even occur to him.

As he broke out of the trees, the source of the light became obvious. The city was burning. He could already hear the screams and shouts coming from the settlement a short distance ahead of him.

"What the...?" It was clearly a huge disaster. A fire of this size had likely already claimed a number of lives.

Ein hesitated. His relationship with the people of this city wasn't good. Was there a point to going and trying to help? What help could he even offer?

Wouldn’t it be smarter to just hurry home, where there was no danger at all? But even in his hesitation, he ran towards the city. There may not have been much he could do, but there was always the chance he could save *someone*. He may have been on bad terms with the people in the city, but he hadn’t fallen so low as to let someone die for a personal grudge.

The city was a sea of flames. No one would have stayed in this situation. Anyone who did would have long since burned to death. Yet the city was filled with figures wrapped in flames, writhing in the streets. Bodies burned to a crisp still lay twisting in agony. There seemed little hope any of them would be alive, little hope they *could* be alive, yet they all still moved. Some of them had been reduced to nothing but bones, making the city look like a den of monsters.

There was no saving anyone here. Ein ran out of the city, back to his home. For the first time, he was grateful that he lived outside the city. Any damage done there wouldn’t reach him. But soon, a sense of dread began to well up in him.

The small, dilapidated trail leading to his home showed clear signs of chaos. Blood soaked the ground. Bits of flesh lay scattered about. The tracks of something moving in enormous numbers, maybe carriages or wagons, led straight towards his house, trampling a number of people in their path.

When he finally made it home, he was greeted by an unbelievable sight.

“Dad!”

His father had been crushed by a lump of metal. Later he would come to know it was an armored truck, but at that time he had no clue what it was. The vehicle had stopped in front of their house, his father only one of the bodies crushed underneath it. In a panic, Ein rushed over to the vehicle and attempted to push it off his father, but it didn’t so much as budge.

“What the hell is happening?! Dammit!”

His father was most likely dead, but that didn’t mean Ein could stand idly by and do nothing. In his confusion, the thoughts of what this thing was doing here or where the rest of his family was hadn’t even occurred to him. When the door of his house swung open and his sister Ariel was dragged outside, his mind finally turned to the rest of his family.

“Huh? Where’d you come from?” said the man who was dragging Ein’s sister behind him. Wearing a black coat over a bare chest, he had a firm grip on Ariel’s hair.

“Who the hell are you?! Let her go!”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. We were ordered to take her alive, you know?”

Without a moment's hesitation, Ein drew his bow from his back and loosed an arrow, planting it firmly in the man's right eye. But the man's grin didn't so much as twitch.

"Nice, very nice. But that's not gonna kill me." He casually tore the arrow from his eye and tossed it aside, ignoring the eyeball still stuck to the arrowhead. Or rather, despite the eyeball on the arrowhead, his right eye was still there, as if nothing had happened to it in the first place.

Ein froze in shock moments before a pair of arms grabbed him from behind. As he was pushed to the ground, a number of people leaped on top of him, pinning him down in seconds.

"But I'm pretty hurt, to be honest. Who the hell am I? Don't you know the name Masayuki? I thought the head of the Immortal Corps was pretty famous by now."

The Immortal Corps. As ignorant of the world as he was, Ein still knew that infamous name. Serving under Sage Lain, it was an immortal battalion of undead, golems, and other lifeless creatures. No atrocity was beyond consideration when it came to fulfilling their objectives, and it was rumored they preferred killing as many people as possible to add to their numbers. The smell of the people pinning him to the ground was enough to confirm they were undead as well.

"What do you want with Ariel?!"

"Don't know, don't care. I was just told to bring her in."

"Dammit! Let me go!" At this rate, he'd be killed. He desperately struggled against the ones restraining him but accomplished nothing.

"Huh. Looks like you got the wrong idea. Do you think I'm a murderer or somethin'?"

"Of course you are! You killed my father, didn't you?!"

"Oh, that guy! Yeah, that was an accident. We just drove on up and he happened to be in the way. We never meant to kill him. If it had been on purpose, we wouldn't have crushed him like this. What a waste."

"You bastard!"

"Ah! But you're still in good shape, aren't ya? Welcome to the crew. We're always looking for fresh blood."

"Like hell I'd join you!"

"Okay, crush him a bit more. Give him enough weight to suffocate him."

Suddenly the pressure on his back increased. Ein could feel his ribs cracking as the air was pushed from his lungs. With no room to expand his chest, he

couldn’t draw in breath.

“Don’t overdo it. If you crush him completely, he’ll lose a lot of firepower __”

Masayuki was interrupted by his head dropping to the ground. The pressure immediately vanished from his back, prompting a bloody coughing fit. The undead holding him down were gone. He was free to move. Still coughing, Ein looked around but couldn’t find the undead anywhere. When he looked up, his eyes went wide. Corpses hung in the air, as if frozen in space.

“You call that a waste, yet set the whole city ablaze? That sounds much more wasteful to me.”

Turning around, Ein saw a woman in a maid uniform. Instinctively, he understood she was a maid in appearance alone. She gave no impression of being subservient to anyone.

“The hell was that for?!” Masayuki roared, his head sitting in his right hand. He had managed to grab it out of the air as it fell. It seemed the leader of the Immortal Corps could handle losing his head without issue.

“I am Teresa, a Knight of the Divine King.”

“What? Why is a Knight butting in?!” Masayuki returned his head to his neck, which reconnected smoothly.

“Butting in? Surely you don’t think I can ignore an entire city being razed.”

“That was just an accident. Bad luck. We just wanted to do some recruiting. It’s their fault everything was made of wood!”

“In any case, the past is the past. I still cannot ignore what you are doing now.”

“So what? You wanna start a war?”

“Well, I suppose the Axis Church and the Sages have a nonintervention pact...but there’s a reason I’m known as a mad dog.”

As Teresa chuckled, dismembered corpses rained down around them. Already confused about how they were floating in the air in the first place, seeing them sliced apart and falling to the ground left Ein at a total loss.

Masayuki clicked his tongue. “Jeez, what a pain. I’m too smart for this. Guess I’m pulling out.”

“My, what a shame. Here I thought you and I were quite alike.” Despite having the option, Teresa seemed to be refraining from attacking him directly.

“Wait...wait...why are you taking her?” Ein choked out. For a moment it seemed like everything had been resolved, but from Ein’s perspective, the main problem was yet to be faced.

Masayuki tossed Ariel into the armored vehicle. “Huh? I told you, this is my job.”

Ein couldn’t move, couldn’t even crawl closer to try and take his sister back. “You! Miss Teresa! Please, do something! You’re from the church, right? You’re a Knight, aren’t you?!” Turning, he begged the woman standing behind him. He had neither the spirit nor the strength to do anything himself, so she was his only hope.

But her response was cold and heartless. “I don’t believe I have any obligation to go that far.”

“Just so you know,” Masayuki interrupted, “this is a job from the Great Sage himself. Even if you stop me, someone else will come after her.”

“See? There’s no point in me doing anything.”

As if to cut off any further conversation, Masayuki hopped into the armored vehicle and immediately drove off.

Ein quickly lost consciousness.

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When he awoke, Ein was lying in bed. He was home, staring at his own familiar ceiling, but he knew the events weren’t just a dream. The pain wracking his body proudly declared the truth of those events. Without rising, he looked around the room to see Teresa stand to leave.

“Good, you’re awake. I may look like a maid, but that’s as far as the comparison goes. You’ll have to handle the rest on your own,” she said as she turned away.

“Wait...let me ask one thing.” Ein was calm. It seemed his time unconscious had helped him get his thoughts in order.

Though clearly irritated, Teresa stopped. “I suppose I can answer a question or two.”

“You’re strong, right? How can I get that strong?”

“I see. If you had said something pathetic, I would have just put you out of your misery, but...” Returning to Ein’s side, Teresa sat down beside his bed.

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“My strength comes from the Gift, a source of supernatural power. It is not particularly uncommon. Does your family not have one?”

“No...not that I know of.”

“I see. The Gift isn’t especially rare, though whether it is useful or not is a different matter. Most of the Sages possess the Gift as well, so without it, you will have no chance of fighting them.”

Ein wanted power. He would defeat the Sages and take back his sister. Teresa understood that immediately.

“If you want the Gift for yourself, go seek out the Swordmaster. If you tell him I sent you...well, that may not do you any good, but he should at least listen to your story.”

There were any number of ways to obtain the Gift, but if he received it from the Sages, he couldn’t use it against them. If he wanted to fight them, he needed the Gift passed down from the Divine King, managed by the Swordmaster.

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Though he succeeded in inheriting the Gift from the Swordmaster, Ein did not become a Knight of the Divine King. The Knights served to keep the Dark Gods imprisoned and exterminate their spawn, but they couldn’t oppose the Sages. Instead, he joined a resistance group aiming to free the world from the grip of the Sages.

He knew Ariel had been taken to the Great Sage, but he had no idea where that was. If he fought against the Sages and eroded their strength, he would eventually reach the Great Sage. Such was his plan, but despite his endless efforts, he couldn’t even match Sage Lain.

Afterwards, his sister had been discarded by the Great Sage and returned to him, but her mind had been lost. Ein spent a great deal of time trying to find a way to return her to normal, traveling across the world at the barest hint of a clue.

In the midst of that despair, the world was suddenly reset. Ein hadn’t lost his memories. Though the world itself had changed, his hatred of the Sages and his obsession with curing his sister made those changes evident. The situation had changed. The Divine King was no longer imprisoned, and Sage Lain no longer existed. But that didn’t change the fact that Ariel had been abducted. In short order, the Great Sage would tire of her, sending her back home in a pathetic state.

In the end, there was no solution but to kill the Great Sage himself. Ein needed to get rid of him before his sister was lost. He understood that the Gift wasn't enough to help him. The Gift was something the Great Sage had brought into this world, so no matter what lineage of Gift he obtained, they would all be useless against him.

So what could he do? He needed a power entirely separate from the Great Sage's. A power that had existed before he had come to this world, or something that was foreign to it. Having traveled across the world in search of information, a vague plan took shape in his head. If he was able to get his hands on the powers of the Dark Gods that the Knights kept sealed away...

Once the first seal was broken and he had defeated the Dark God that lay within, the rest was easy enough. One Dark God agreed to assist him in his plan to kill the Great Sage, and with its power, he was able to defeat others. Negotiations, threats, theft, absorption—no method was off-limits in Ein's search for power.

The power he obtained was far greater than the human body could handle. Naturally, he paid the price for that. His memories were lost. His emotions were lost. He abandoned his human form, lost all sense of social awareness, and even his objective started to become vague and uncertain. The only thing he just barely held on to was his memory of Ariel.

As he was now, Ein knew what was happening across the entire world. Yet even so, he couldn't find the Great Sage or his sister. It seemed the Great Sage had managed to hide his dwelling from any sort of ability that might find it. Ein briefly considered wiping out the Sages, the Great Sage's underlings. If they were entirely exterminated, surely the Great Sage would have to show himself. The plan was simple enough, but he never ended up needing it.

Without warning, without any visible reason, the Great Sage had appeared.

Chapter 3 — I’m Tired of Fights like This

Everything was gone from the top level of the pyramid. A good chunk of the floor was missing, revealing the interior of the structure. There had been nothing atop the pyramid but the small shrine, but now no traces of it remained. That meant the door leading to the next area was also gone, leaving no way for participants to progress through the game.

“I’m not really worried about you, gramps, but if you fight around here, it’ll cause all sorts of problems.”

“Sorry. This is the first time in a while someone has tried something against me directly. I’m kind of curious,” Mitsuki apologized in response to Van’s grumbling. Van had hoped the Great Sage would either run away or dispatch the enemy quickly, but now it seemed like he’d stay and watch until his curiosity was sated.

“Okay, fine. But the participants will all be coming this way, so finish up before they start arriving.”

“I don’t think it’ll take that long. I just want to talk with him a bit.”

“You think that thing can talk?”

Van looked at the monstrosity before them. At first, it had looked vaguely human, but in the short time he had looked away, the creature had transformed. It now had four leglike appendages, one resembling twisted, creeping vines and another like a shaft of metal. It had six arms, each so distinct they may have come from different creatures altogether. Organs reminiscent of eyes dotted the creature all over, giving it a line of sight in all directions. There was no sign of intelligence coming from the chaotic mess of a monster. It didn’t seem to Van like there was much room for discussion.

“Hmm, I can’t say,” Mitsuki answered. “But it does seem like it wants to kill me, so it probably has something to complain about, right?”

“Give...back...Ari...el...” Though it was hard to tell where the creature’s face was, and it clearly was struggling to make anything resembling speech, it did appear to have the intelligence necessary to converse.

“Ariel... Ariel... Oh! Right, Ariel! But what do you mean, ‘give her back’? She’s not trapped with me or anything. She’s allowed to go home whenever she

wants."

"Come on, gramps. You know how rough they are when picking up girls for you."

The orders of the Great Sage were absolute. Even if Mitsuki were to say something as casual as "she looks cute," the Sages and their underlings would fight to the death to bring that girl to him. This had caused any number of tragedies, but it seemed Mitsuki had not been told of them, nor was he interested in investigating the matter himself.

"Well, let's not worry about that now. If you wanted to negotiate with me, didn't you realize attacking me right off the bat is a bad idea? If I die, you'll never get Ariel back."

Only those recognized by the Great Sage could traverse the boundary around his dwelling. If he were to die, it was quite likely it would be permanently sealed off from the outside world.

"Graaaaaaaah!" The monster swung a crystalline arm forward. In the direction it moved, a line of crystal formed along the floor of the pyramid. Mitsuki stood on that newly formed crystal path but was otherwise unaffected. The same, however, could not be said about Van at his side.

"Gah! What the?!" Part of Van's body had transformed into crystal as the crystal wrapped around him. It wasn't significant damage, but it did make it harder for him to move.

"This thing could kill you, Van; you should be more careful. Like, actually dodge the attacks, maybe."

"There was no way I could have dodged that one. But I'm pretty sure something like this won't kill me." With Van's lesser reflexes, even if he saw the attack coming, there was no way he could have moved out of the way. Although the Sages had particularly strong physical abilities, Van himself wasn't especially skilled when it came to fighting. His abilities specialized in the creation and management of game worlds.

"Can you heal it?" Mitsuki asked.

"Probably."

Van created a healing area around his feet. The ground around him took on a faint glow, and in short order his body returned to normal. He wasn't omnipotent by any stretch, but placing objects in the game world was easy enough.

The crystal path under them suddenly shattered as the monster rushed forward. A number of its arms swung at Mitsuki in unison, but the Great Sage made no effort to dodge them. The creature roared as its fists found their mark,

but Mitsuki didn't so much as budge.

It was a strange sight. Anyone watching might have expected tremendous shock waves coming from the immense impacts, but nothing of the sort happened. The monster's fists made contact with Mitsuki and then stopped, as if the creature had never intended to attack him in the first place.

Anyone with normal faculties would see this result and be overcome with fear or despair. Many would drop to their knees under the feeling of overwhelming helplessness. But this monster in particular showed no sign of giving up. One of its arms dissolved, splitting into countless tiny strands that wrapped around the Great Sage.

"If we can't talk properly, I won't even be able to figure out your name. Alexia," Mitsuki called out, invisible within the writhing mass.

"Yes?" In an instant, Alexia, the Great Sage's secretary, had appeared at his side.

"Do you know who this guy is? It seems like he has a bone to pick with me."

"Please wait a moment."

The Great Sage was omnipotent within this world. If he wanted to, he could figure out the true identity of this creature on his own. But he didn't. Taking the easy route felt boring to him, so he preferred more roundabout methods.

"Hero Ein. The elder brother of Ariel. He has obtained the power of the Dark Gods native to this world and has lost most of his sanity. I imagine conversing with him will be impossible."

"Hmm. That's a pretty selfish way of doing things. Even if you beat me, what do you think Ariel would think of you now?"

"What would you like me to do? Shall I dispose of this thing?" the secretary asked.

"No, he went through the trouble of finding me himself. It would be rude for me to leave this to someone else."

Ein's arm had turned into something of a fist again, smashing Mitsuki into the ground repeatedly. Each impact shook the pyramid, causing it to break apart. The floor under them was starting to collapse, dropping everyone into the pyramid proper.

"Gramps! The game won't be able to continue at this rate!"

"Are you sure? You should still be able to make things work."

"The other participants are going to get caught up in your fight! It's also going to take resources to rebuild the stage. This stuff isn't unlimited!"

"Oh, okay. Alexia, let's move."

“Understood,” the secretary responded naturally, unfazed by Mitsuki still being trapped in the monster’s grip.

Suddenly, Ein shot sideways. Punching through the wall of the pyramid, he was thrown outside, over the ocean surrounding the island. Van hurriedly followed them out. Ein’s enormous fist exploded outwards, freeing Mitsuki. He then fell into the water, while Mitsuki dropped down and landed on the water’s surface.

“Is this area more acceptable?” Alexia asked, floating in the air a short distance away. Van came up alongside her to watch.

“I would think so,” Mitsuki replied.

“But please be careful,” Van said, trying to warn off his optimism. Ein was immensely powerful. It wouldn’t be that hard for him to damage the island from here.

“That’s really up to Ein, I think.”

At some point, dark clouds had gathered above them. The wind began to howl and the waves in the ocean climbed higher and higher as a storm brewed. A moment later, countless waterspouts shot up around them, drawing seawater up into the sky. Lightning flashed through the pillars of water as they closed in on Mitsuki from all directions. The clouds above gathered into a single enormous storm cloud, flashing more lightning down to the surface, connecting the sea and sky and filling the area with blinding light. The waterspouts gathered around Mitsuki, combining into a gigantic cyclone.

The sea then froze. The surface of the water turned solid as far as the eye could see, and was then ripped apart by the tornado. The chunks of ice whirled upwards, assaulting the Great Sage inside it.

Van had lost track of what was happening between the growing intensity of the lightning flashing around them and the blinding effect of the cyclone.

“Well...I know gramps would be fine on his own, but can you do something about this, Alexia?”

“He already decided he would fight the monster himself.”

For a while, Van and Alexia watched the cycle of the storm, lightning striking to vaporize the water, and ice forming cold enough to freeze even the water superheated by the lightning. The strange storm continued for a while, but when it finally abated, Mitsuki was naturally standing entirely unharmed.

“That’s not going to work...” Despite what he said, it seemed Mitsuki still intended to fight the monster one-on-one.

A moment later, the frozen surface of the ocean ruptured as an enormous

mass shot up from below. It was hard to believe an entirely different creature would appear at this point, so Van had to assume it was still Ein, despite the significant transformation he had undergone. Now sporting tentacles, scales, and a shell, perhaps obtained by absorbing life living in the water, he had grown to a size that made Van and the others look tiny. A crack split the creature, separating top from bottom. That was likely its jaw. Within the maw were rows of countless teeth and a growing light.

"So that was all buying time for this, then?"

Ein roared. The howl split the ocean beneath them, forcing Van and Alexia to retreat hurriedly back to the sky. This was still just preparation.

Opening his jaw as wide as he could manage, Ein fired an enormous beam of condensed heat. The sea was immediately vaporized, the air itself ignited, and half the island was annihilated. The beam had lasted for only a fraction of a second, but it had been enough to erase everything in front of him.

"Wow... Are any of them still alive?" Van muttered to himself. The pyramid was situated at the center of the island, so naturally half of it had been blown away by the attack. Even the adventurers in the surviving half of the structure would be struck by a terrible shock wave.

"Hmm. I kind of feel like I should apologize. I guess this is proof that even if all the Dark Gods worked together, they still can't stand up to me." The cloud of steam created by the attack slowly dissipated, revealing Mitsuki, totally unharmed, exactly as Van and Alexia had assumed. Neither of them had been worried about him in the least.

Perhaps having finally exhausted himself, Ein had stopped moving.

"You were trying really hard, so I thought I'd see what you had to offer...but I'm tired of fights like this. I think it's about time you came back to your senses." If he so wished, Mitsuki could meet power with power and create a rather magnificent clash. But by the time Van had been born, the Great Sage had already grown out of such things.

Mitsuki held out his right hand towards Ein. The tentacles protruding from the creature's mass slipped off and fell to the water below. His shell, his scales, and then whales and sharks followed suit. Everything he had absorbed from the ocean split off and fell away. The creature's mountainous form gradually shrank, returning him to the form they had seen on his first arrival.

But the changes didn't stop there. A crystalline spider, a dragon, a bird wrapped in flames—one by one the Dark Gods that Ein had absorbed were torn away from him. Each and every one of them held a grudge against Mitsuki, but

as if understanding they were outmatched, they all disappeared with no more than a hateful glare. In the end, only Ein remained. Floating powerless in the water, he seemed otherwise in good health. He had returned to being an ordinary human.

"I feel like I just watched someone unboil an egg," Van commented. "Or turn café au lait back into milk and coffee."

"If Lord Mitsuki desired it, such would happen," Alexia replied. "That is the law of this world." Normally, there would be no way for such a chaotic mess of beings to return to normal. But what was impossible for others was easy enough for Mitsuki.

"Now you should be sane again. We should be able to talk properly now," Mitsuki said as he approached Ein.

"Give her back... Give Ariel back!" With a splash, Ein disappeared. Van looked around to find him standing a small distance away on the surface of the water. The water was still, flat and motionless like the surface of a mirror. It was as if all of Ein's power had been directed inward.

"He awakened, huh?" Van mumbled.

There were times when new powers could arise when one transcended the limits of the Gift. Having exhausted everything he had but still unable to measure up to his opponent, overcoming that despair and choosing to fight on, his true power as a hero had manifested. Even watching from a distance, Van felt a cold sweat forming. He was confident he could deal with almost anyone, but he wasn't so sure he could beat Ein in that state.

Ein vanished again, appearing in front of Mitsuki, already swinging his Holy Sword. It was an attack that was backed by all of his being, every ounce of energy in his body and spirit condensed into a single blow. The holy blade struck Mitsuki's head, a perfect attack. If this had been a battle between Hero and Demon Lord, it would have spelled certain victory for the Hero.

But this was the Great Sage, the ultimate ruler of this world. The Holy Sword snapped in two, the broken blade flying off in a random direction. Dropping the shattered weapon, Ein struck with his fists. As his right fist struck Mitsuki's face, Ein's arm crumpled, a fate matched by his left fist, right elbow, and then left knee.

Not slowing down in the least, Ein's broken limbs continued to lash out, pulverizing themselves into dust. Even so, Ein continued, throwing himself on the Great Sage and biting at his neck, his teeth shattering. Having run out of body parts to use, he roared and struck with a headbutt. As with the other parts

of his body, his forehead shattered. No longer having the strength to even cling on to his enemy, Ein fell to the water.

But even as he floated helpless, he continued to flail and scream.

“Now you can see the gap in power between us. Sadly, it’s not a gap you can ever cross, though if you can come up with some sort of miracle to beat me, I’d love to see it.”

As Mitsuki looked down with a sad expression at him, Ein finally stopped. He had surpassed all his limits, exhausted every shred of power he possessed.

“Please...give Ariel back... Make her normal again...”

His heart had been broken as thoroughly as his body. He had tasted for himself how useless any amount of effort or perseverance was against Mitsuki. He knew now his only hope was to beg for the mercy of his opponent.

Van didn’t find it pathetic. That was exactly what he expected from someone who fought the Great Sage. In fact, he felt Ein had actually worked pretty hard to get to where he was.

“I told you already, she’s not trapped. She can leave whenever she wants. Hey, Alexia.”

“Yes?”

“Take him back to my place and look after him for a bit. Let him and his sister talk things out.”

“Understood.” Alexia descended to Ein’s side before vanishing along with him.

“Okay, shall we go back?” Mitsuki floated up beside Van.

“What do I do about that?” Van looked at the broken pyramid, at a total loss.

“There’s no way they can keep going through the pyramid, so why not give a pass to everyone who’s still alive?” Mitsuki suggested.

“Hmm...I guess it’s a bit late to be worried about the rules I set out at the start.”

“Also, here. You need this, right?” Mitsuki held out a transparent, round stone.

“Ah, that’s the one the dog had, right?” It was a Philosopher’s Stone. Apparently, Mitsuki had retrieved it after it had been blown away by Ein’s attack. “I wonder what I should do with it. It was supposed to be used to prove you were eligible for the last boss fight... Maybe I should give it back to Takatou?”

Van started floating back to the pyramid, Mitsuki following slowly behind him.

Chapter 4 — Too Bad! Your Adventure Ends Here!

“Although it’s known as the ‘Prison Area,’ this is simply an ordinary dungeon, is it not?”

Daimon Hanakawa, Ryouko Ninomiya, and Carol S. Lane made their way through the interior of the pyramid in their pursuit of Yogiri.

Hanakawa wore a kung fu uniform to match his class of Monk. Ryouko wore the traditional Japanese formal wear of her Samurai class, while Carol wore bright red ninja gear that seemed rather ill-suited to actually sneaking around. Since they received a boost to their abilities for wearing equipment that matched their classes, they couldn’t turn down the equipment, even if it did look a little strange.

“I guess it’s called a prison because once you enter, you can’t leave,” Carol replied offhandedly.

“It is strange to me that monsters would be attacking us in a simple prison,” Ryouko added, slicing an attacking lizardman in two as she spoke.

“Hm. Prison guards, maybe?”

“It feels like they’re just attacking us at random. It doesn’t feel like they’re trying to manage this place or anything.”

“It does seem like a bit of an anticlimax for the final dungeon, does it not?” Hanakawa said. “There do not appear to be any significant gimmicks at play.”

“There’s also so much space. It doesn’t feel much like a dungeon,” Carol added.

The corridor was ten meters across and ten meters high. The path split here and there to create something of a labyrinth, but there were nothing like traps or other mechanisms. On top of that, holding a Philosopher’s Stone allowed one to tell where the entrance to the next level was, so they couldn’t really get lost either.

You could say needing a Philosopher’s Stone to pass through the gates was kind of a dungeon mechanic, but a single stone in the party allowed everyone to pass through any number of gates, so it didn’t require any thought on the part of the players.

“It does appear the monsters are growing stronger as we progress,” Ryouko said. “We need to stay vigilant.”

“Indeed. No matter how simple our journey thus far, this is still the last dungeon—and in fact, there are monsters attacking right now!”

Following the lead of the Philosopher’s Stone, their path was blocked by five skeletons. According to Hanakawa’s Discernment skill, they weren’t any stronger than the monsters they had encountered so far.

“Why don’t you try fighting, Hanakawa?”

“I believe the teamwork you two have shown far outshines any contribution I might make!”

Ryouko sighed. “Carol and I aren’t some dream team that can read each other’s minds while fighting, you know.”

“Oh, come on, Hanakawa!” Carol said. “Don’t make me show you my Fourth Dimensional Killing technique!”

Thus far, Ryouko and Carol had been so efficient at dispatching monsters that Hanakawa had yet to get involved in fighting. Though he obtained a reasonable level of fighting power as he gained Monk levels, he felt that trying to contribute would only slow things down. So instead, he kept a careful watch on their rear while the two girls cleaned up the monsters.

“I suppose I have let the current draw me this far,” Hanakawa mused, “but do we really want to continue on this path? Sir Takatou intends to return to our world, killing anyone he needs to on the way...but I do not especially feel a desire to go back there.”

If their goal was to get home, sticking with Yogiri was their best bet. They had no idea how many people Takatou would be able to bring home with him, but at the very least, being around him was their best chance of getting back. As cold as he acted, Yogiri had quite a soft side. If they doggedly stuck with him, though he might complain, it was unlikely he would force them to leave.

But Hanakawa was more interested in enjoying his life in this new world. He had been summoned twice, but he doubted fate would bless him with a third trip. It was most realistic to assume this was his last chance.

“Yet, staying here has its own...challenges,” he continued.

This world was extremely dangerous. Having a few cheat powers up your sleeve wasn’t enough to survive. Even if Hanakawa achieved his dream of finding a quiet place to settle down and enjoy a harem life, the chance of a sudden inexplicable event ruining everything was quite high.

“This is no doubt the turning point of my life. If I just go with the flow here,

it may be too late for me before I know it!”

Hanakawa decided to think through the possible scenarios. First, the case where Yogiri actually managed to make it home. In that case, all the powerful people currently involved in trying to exterminate him would have been slain. The Sages and the Great Sage would be unlikely to allow him to return home, so they would likely be killed as well.

“Hmm...that is a rather good outcome, is it not? If all the monstrous beings are taken out together, there may be some room for me to have a quiet life.”

However, assuming Yogiri would kill *all* of them was being too optimistic. There were likely plenty of people who were content to watch events here unfold from the sidelines. In that case, Hanakawa would need the power to survive in a world under their influence.

“Perhaps returning with Sir Takatou is the best option. There are plenty of anime, manga, and games yet to come, which I would like to see... No! That future is still too dark! Living balanced on that eternal tightrope is far worse than the danger this world offers!”

So how would he obtain the power needed to survive in this world? Simply speaking, he could continue to expand his powers as a Monk. He now possessed the Limit Break skill, so he would continue to get stronger without restrictions as he trained.

“But even so, such power only looks excellent in comparison to my past as a Healer...”

The people he had met along his journey so far made the powers available even to a high-level Monk seem next to useless. Any encounter with a godlike being would put an end to him.

“Perhaps I should make an attempt at the power offered by the Great Sage? Would such a power persist after the Great Sage’s death? On that note, is Sir Takatou actually capable of defeating the Great Sage?”

There was one other possibility: Takatou being killed by someone and the world returning to its previous state. The question there would be, exactly which point would the world revert back to?

“That would result in time rewinding to a point before our bus arrived, wouldn’t it?”

The Great Sage had learned that the problems had all started when Yogiri first appeared in this world. Currently, Yogiri’s presence was preventing him from resetting the world properly, so if he reset the world to a point where Yogiri just ended up coming back, it would all happen again. That meant it was

likely the Great Sage would arrange things so that their class had never come to this world.

“No, no, no! That is a terrible possibility! Perhaps Sir Takatou returning home is the best option after all! Or wait...is there room for me to negotiate with the Great Sage to maintain my place in this world?”

“What are you mumbling about?”

“Wah! How much have you heard?!”

The battle over, Carol was now standing at Hanakawa’s side.

“I can’t say I cared enough to listen to any of it. I just thought you sounded gross, mumbling to yourself like that.”

“Perhaps you should take a bit more interest in me. Who knows? I may be plotting something horrible!”

“Yeah? The moment I see anything like that from you, pop! Head come off!”

“Again, please stop with the fake bad Japanese...”

“Let’s go.” Ryouko set off alone, Hanakawa and Carol hurrying to catch up with her.

After a decent stretch of time, they came up against a pitch-black wall. This was one of the gates that required a Philosopher’s Stone to pass through. Inside was a staircase heading to the next floor. Once you passed through, the gate behind you would turn into a solid wall, so there was no going back. In short, it was the same as all the others.

Climbing up the stairs and through the next gate, they could feel the atmosphere around them change. Something was clearly different here.

“It feels like there’s something here, doesn’t it?” Ryouko said, raising her guard. It wasn’t just an abstract feeling. A musky, humid air lingered around them.

“Is this the midboss, perhaps?” Hanakawa guessed. “I thought our progress was too smooth...”

“Not that you did anything to help,” Ryouko replied.

“I am always prepared to assist should the need arise!”

“Then fine, here’s your ‘need.’ Take it away.” Carol stepped back, pushing Hanakawa forward.

“Uh, wait, you’re serious?”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. It’s been easy so far; why would there be a sudden difficulty spike now?”

“Well...I suppose you are correct. Though Cavern Quest has its fair share of failures, the balance seems more or less reliable.”

Hanakawa looked around. They were at a dead end in the corridor, so there was no option but to move forward. Farther ahead lay a T-junction, so they would soon have to choose to head either left or right. The next gate appeared to be to the left, so normally, that would be the direction they picked.

“Do you not have any kind of detection skills, Hanakawa?” Ryouko asked.

“I am afraid not. My only information skill is Discernment. I must clearly see my target to read their stats with it.”

With no knowledge of where the enemy was, he had to proceed carefully. Slowly, he inched towards the intersection, peeking around the wall to look. To the left, he saw only red. Without even time to be confused by the sight, he soon learned all too well what was in front of him, as searing flames roasted his face. It had been fire. His eyes burned out, his throat was incinerated, and his entire face was charred black. Unable to stand such an injury, he immediately flopped forward.

Th-This is bad!

Normally, he would have had no time to entertain such thoughts, but his resilience as a Monk had enabled him to avoid dying instantly. Thanks to his resistance to pain, he could still think somewhat rationally even in this state.

Carol pulled the collapsed Hanakawa back to safety. As she did, Hanakawa’s Auto Heal skill restored his face.

“My...were I still but a Healer, that would have been the end for me!”

In order to use magic, one had to either call the commands verbally or use the Battlesong UI. With his throat and eyes destroyed, neither would have been possible. He would have had no way of activating his healing powers. As a Monk, however, he possessed a skill called Auto Heal, which activated of its own accord.

“That was gross!”

“That is the first thing you have to say after I risked my life to discover the danger ahead?!”

“Seeing the blackened skin peel back to reveal fresh skin underneath... Ugh, I never want to see that again!”

“More importantly, what was that?” Ryouko asked, ignoring Carol’s complaints.

“Well...I had yet to see much of anything before it incinerated my face.”

“You’re useless!”

“I disagree,” Ryouko countered. “Now we know that something will attack us the moment we enter the intersection. It was not entirely for nothing.”

“As expected of my Ryouko! You truly understand my worth!”

“So, what now?”

“It looked like a fireball. I don’t think it was too fast for us to dodge it.”

As Carol and Ryouko discussed their plan of action, they could hear footsteps. The floor shook with each one, meaning whatever was around the corner must have been considerably large. Before they could make a decision, the creature stepped around the corner.

It was a dragon. Five meters tall, walking on four legs, it was like a giant lizard with a pair of wings folded on its back. Even now, fire was flickering around its mouth, indicating where the previous fireball had come from. It was clearly a level above any of the monsters they had encountered thus far.

“Your turn, Hanakawa!”

“Up until now there have been nothing but zombies and skeletons!” Hanakawa cried. “What kind of horrible game suddenly throws a dragon at you?!”

The dragon opened its mouth wide, launching another ball of fire. Ryouko and Carol leaped away, leaving Hanakawa alone to take the blast. This time, however, he had seen the attack coming and was able to take defensive action. Lifting both hands in front of him, he concentrated his energy into a blast of his own. Though it hadn’t been powerful enough to neutralize the incoming attack, it was enough for him to survive.

Before he could so much as open his mouth to complain, the two girls had jumped into action. Ryouko closed in, slashing at the dragon’s forelegs, while Carol threw kunai at its eyes. Ryouko’s blade bounced off the dragon’s tough scales, and she was forced to retreat as it stomped towards her. It was surprisingly quick given its bulk. If she had been a hair slower, she would have been crushed. Carol’s kunai struck the dragon’s eyes, but that was it. They didn’t stab through, instead bouncing off harmlessly.

“You wouldn’t happen to have any dragon-slaying skills, would you?” Carol asked with a strained smile.

“I’m afraid not. Even my iron-cutting slash skill failed to have any effect.”

“Huh? Then, are we actually in trouble?” Hanakawa asked.

“I’m just a Ninja. We’re specialized in killing human beings, so my skills are only that of a well-trained normal person. Do you have any secret techniques, Ryouko?”

“You ask too much of the Samurai class. At best, we can handle fighting youkai.”

“I guess I should expect a message like ‘Too bad! Your adventure ends here!’” Carol laughed. It seemed she was thoroughly convinced by their short exchange that they stood no chance.

“Is this really the time for laughter?!” Hanakawa snapped. “Even if we cannot defeat it, surely we can find an opening to run past!”

“Uh, I don’t think so. Oh, maybe if we leave someone behind as bait!”

“Huh?”

Carol suddenly vanished. A moment later, Ryouko did the same. That was most likely one of Carol’s Ninja skills at work.

“Wait, hold on! Surely your skill can handle hiding a third person!” Hanakawa shouted after her.

“It would be weird if *all* of us disappeared, don’t you think?” Carol’s voice echoed from the empty air.

“The two of you disappearing is strange enough already!”

“But it’s still natural for it to attack the one it can still see!”

“Gah! Spiritual Refinement, then!”

Spiritual Refinement was a Monk skill used to gather energy. This energy could be put to use in a number of ways, so if he was not yet committed to taking action, this was a safe option. The gathered energy only persisted for a short time, however, so he couldn’t maintain it constantly.

Now that I think about it, can Spiritual Refinement be used to find enemies?

Hanakawa noticed that as the energy accumulated, his senses sharpened. As his sense of hearing improved, he could tell something was moving some distance away. Focusing on the sound, he recognized it as footsteps retreating. Though the sound had been hidden, it hadn’t been completely erased. In other words, Carol and Ryouko had already retreated behind the dragon.

“Hey! I thought you were pretending to leave me behind as you snuck behind it for a sneak attack!”

The two gave no response to Hanakawa’s shout, fleeing down the corridor at top speed.

Space distorted around him. Hanakawa leaped upward, narrowly avoiding the dragon’s swinging tail. His sharpened senses had predicted the attack.

“Oh? Is it possible that—”

With the Monk class’s skills, he might be able to handle this dragon. The moment he thought that, a fireball came to teach him it was but a fleeting fantasy. He instantly used the gathered energy he had prepared to defend against the attack. Taking the fireball head-on, Hanakawa was sent flying backward but

narrowly managed to avoid any serious burns. Impacting the ceiling, he then dropped to the floor. He immediately jumped to his feet, only to see the dragon's claws above him. It really was fast for its size.

The dragon swung its huge leg down. He had exhausted his gathered energy. He no longer had time to evade or defend himself.

"S-Someone, help!" Hanakawa howled, knowing full well that nothing so convenient would happen.

"Okay."

So when a reply came, Hanakawa was thoroughly shocked.

An explosion sounded as the dragon slumped down sideways. Its raised leg flopped to the ground, missing Hanakawa entirely. He scurried backwards, looking for the source of the voice. Standing behind him was a girl in a stage idol's uniform.

"How cruel of them to abandon one of their own classmates."

"Hmm. I get the sneaking suspicion that might be a crime we are all guilty of..." Hanakawa mumbled.

It seemed, however, that his classmate Sora Akino had entirely forgotten how they had abandoned Yogiri and the others on the bus at the beginning of their journey.

Chapter 5 — I Have No Wish to Commit So Flippantly to Such a Heavy Contract!

People commonly said that Sora Akino was terminally optimistic. She loved herself, had little sense of danger, and came across as an airheaded pacifist.

While some of that must have been with her from birth, a good deal of it also came from her upbringing. She was brought up in an affluent and overprotective household that waited on her like a princess. Being both attractive and bright, she never suffered setbacks or frustration, each and every one of her desires being granted for her as a matter of course. Of course, those wishes were all rather easily fulfilled. From the beginning, she had never wished for very much.

In her eyes, the world was a warm, kind, and gentle place. It was only natural for a girl in her position to feel like everything revolved around her. Of course, she also understood that acting like that would make people despise her. Though there may have been some exceptions, she knew that a measure of humility was necessary in most situations. No matter how much money she had or how talented she was, she wasn't the richest person in the world, nor was she the head of some dictatorship. It was clear to her that she needed to distinguish between what was possible and impossible for her.

In that respect, her desire to become an idol was something well within the realm of possibility. She felt like becoming one was something of an obligation she had to the world. She knew her appearance, musical talent, and physical fitness were well above average. She honestly felt like hiding that talent away would be a crime. In the end, after considering a number of ways to put her skills to use, she decided that becoming a pop idol was the most effective option. It wasn't the result of a childhood dream, nor of any admiration she held for the profession. Despite all that, her talent was undeniable. She immediately took center stage as the leader of her idol group, a result she thought was only natural.

After becoming an idol as a middle school student, she applied to enter an ordinary high school rather than one specialized in the performing arts. There was no particular reason for her decision, except perhaps that the school was quite close to her home. She had no intention in the least of leaving her gracious and supportive parents' home. One might have expected a girl of national fame

attending an ordinary high school to cause something of an uproar, but her daily life ended up being rather calm and ordinary.

That was all a result of her aura. Sora's natural disposition had a way of influencing the people around her. Ordinary people she passed on the street found it difficult to approach her, while her classmates interacted with her like any other student. It was almost as if the world was responding to the way she wished it would be. Normally, dreams and reality diverged sharply, but for Sora, that wasn't the case.

There had been no doubt in her mind that this peaceful life would continue forever, but it had eventually come to an end with her being drawn into another world. Even she felt helpless after such a bewildering experience.

However, she didn't lose her composure. She had been summoned by the Sages to another world. Considering herself the protagonist of the story, she didn't think it was all that strange. She felt no need to step up and become a leader for the class after their arrival. At school, she was just another student, and she had no issue maintaining that here. If there was someone else suited to the task, she was happy to let them handle it. Luckily, Suguru Yazaki had taken the reins of leadership, and she was happy to let him.

His first decision had been to abandon their classmates who had failed to receive the Gift, using them as bait while they fled to the nearest city. Though she objected, Sora ultimately cooperated. There may have been a way they could have saved everyone, but with their limited time, there was only so much they could do. Yazaki had proposed the plan, and Haruto Ootori had approved it. As much of a pacifist as she was, she wasn't personally or proactively involved in the plan, so she excused herself of guilt.

Whether thanks to their efforts or not, the class managed to reach the city, clearing their first mission. The second mission quickly appeared in the corner of their vision.

Second Mission

Objective: Accomplish Great Feats

Advice: A great feat is an accomplishment that anyone would recognize. Defeating a Demon Lord or pioneering untamed wilds would be examples. However, with no knowledge of this world, it will be difficult for you to understand what might be counted as a great feat. With that in mind, I have enlisted the king of Manii. I imagine he could use your help, so I suggest you assist him.

With that advice, they had no choice but to head for the capital. At some point, a number of their classmates broke off from the group, but she was sure they had their own reasons. Without making any effort to find them, the remainder of the class pressed on. Riding the train would get them to the capital quite quickly, but they wouldn't grow at all on the way. So instead, they decided to train while heading for the capital on foot.

At first, things went quite well. Yazaki served as leader, while the rest of the class supported him. But as they passed through the Haqua Forest, the future started looking bleak. As their Gifts developed, a clear gap in abilities was starting to form. The Gift changed depending on the personalities and skills of the people who received it, so there was no equality in how it developed. At this rate, those who excelled in fighting would continue to grow, leaving the others behind. It was natural for those who couldn't fight to become ashamed and timid, while those with the strength to fight grew condescending and overbearing.

Yazaki was losing his ability to keep the class united. The General class had skills based on leadership, but they were only effective if everyone involved agreed with the plan. He had no way to force people to comply. Yazaki didn't have the power to lead everyone alone. Realizing that this failing put their chance of clearing the second mission in jeopardy, Sora decided to take the role of leader for herself.

Once she had decided to keep everyone together, the rest was simple. She already had the charisma to make people love and obey her without relying on something like the Gift. On top of that, her class of Idol gave her the Oath skill, which granted wishes in exchange for vows taken by the wisher. In short, by drawing vows out of her classmates not to attack each other, she leveled up all of their abilities. In this way, she was able to prevent their classmates from using their Gifts against each other.

Once Sora assumed her new role, things proceeded smoothly. At least on the surface, the class was fully united, and training progressed without issue. Their growth continued at an efficient pace, so they made the decision to leave the Haqua Forest.

From there, they took a train to the capital and met the challenge of the Underworld beneath the city. Sora had thought they would find some way to clear the Underworld together, but in the end, she died before it could be accomplished. Upon reaching the sixth level, they had all been thrust into a

death match with each other. In the middle of the death match, she had been caught and devoured by a strange blob.

And then the world was reset.

Unlike their first experience, this time, a strange new life form had invaded the world. Sora decided to join Cavern Quest, where she received a message from the Great Sage. The disappearance of a number of their classmates was because of Yogiri Takatou's powers. So the natural course of action for her was to kill Yogiri and save her lost classmates.

Her reason was that there would be fewer victims this way. Comparing the lives of her many innocent classmates to that of a single mass murderer who would only continue to kill, there was no other conclusion she could have reached.

Yogiri apparently had the power to kill anything and everything, but Sora wasn't afraid of him. She was rather optimistic. Her opponent wasn't a god, or a king, or a mindless monster. He was a high school student, someone she could speak to and reason with. If she could make him listen, he would realize the weight of his sin. She honestly believed he would sacrifice his own life to save his classmates.

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"Anyway, you're saving me, right?!" As pathetic as he knew it was, Hanakawa was more than happy to grasp at any lifeline thrown his way.

"Yes, that was my intention," Sora replied with a bright smile. Confronted with that calculated, perfectly refined smile, Hanakawa's heart began to race.

He had no idea what had happened, but for now, the dragon had stopped moving. He quickly scurried to Sora's side. The dragon's right leg had been shredded. With a leg suddenly missing, it had lost its balance and collapsed. But even now that leg was starting to regenerate. It didn't seem like any magic was being used, so it must have been a natural property of the dragon itself. Enormous, fast, breathing fire, and capable of healing most wounds, it was clearly a creature to be feared.

"Umm, your class is Idol, right, Sora? I cannot imagine it is one with much combat ability...but are you actually rather strong?" Hanakawa asked, uneasy. The dragon had been injured, and he could only imagine it was thanks to Sora, but she didn't appear to have much in the way of combat strength.

"Of course not. Idols don't fight, so we're not strong at all."

“Huh? But did you not do something to that dragon?”

“I only came because I heard someone calling for help.”

Hanakawa stared back at her. He was starting to get a bad feeling about this. Sora was certainly cute, and as much as it ill-suited this dungeon, her stage outfit had been quite well put together. But in this situation, it hardly felt like she’d be saving him from much of anything.

“So you *will* save me?”

“That was my intention...but how are we going to do it?”

“Uh, I must ask, what skills does the Idol class actually afford you? I would imagine something like singing and dancing, thus perhaps the ability to charm enemies? Well, even if you cannot make them into allies, something that would make them lose interest, or some sort of hate management would be perfectly acceptable here!”

“My main skill is Oath. Making a vow to me grants you a wish, and if you break that vow, you’re punished. Ah!” she suddenly exclaimed. “Why don’t you make a wish to get us out of this, Hanakawa?”

“Er, I am not quite sure we have time for that!”

The dragon, having finished regenerating, was now glaring at them. It seemed the creature didn’t understand what had happened either, so it was still on guard against them, but it wouldn’t hold back forever. Hanakawa couldn’t imagine it would stand idly by while he made his vow.

“Umm, by the way, do you have any quick ideas for a wish you could grant me?”

“Hmm. If your vow is something like ‘if I use my right hand, I’ll die,’ then it should give you a good power boost.”

“I have no wish to commit so flippantly to such a heavy contract!”

The dragon could attack at any moment. He didn’t have the time to think of a balanced vow.

“I feel like things will work out regardless,” Sora said, not the least bit afraid.

Hanakawa realized they were suddenly surrounded by people. From young men with Japanese fans dressed for an idol concert, to middle-aged men in business suits, to young girls in school uniforms, the crowd contained people of all ages, genders, and professions.

“What is this?” Hanakawa asked.

“I do have another skill. It’s called Fanatic Fans. Fans of mine always seem to appear out of nowhere, ready to help me at any moment.”

“Quite literally appearing from nowhere in this case! We’re in the middle of

a dungeon in another world here!”

The legion of fans rushed at the dragon. The dragon swung its right leg, crushing a chubby young man to a pulp. It seemed the fans weren’t especially strong...or so Hanakawa thought until the dragon’s right leg exploded. The creature recoiled. As it did, a man in a suit leaped onto its left leg and detonated.

The dragon roared, a mixture of pain, confusion, and perhaps even fear in its cry. It was bewildered. Humans with no fear of death were continuously rushing in and self-destructing. With no understanding of what was happening, it was only natural it would be afraid.

“So...is that how you saved me earlier? And yet you acted as if you had no idea what had happened?”

She had even acted as if she didn’t know what they were going to do next.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have any control over this skill,” Sora explained. “They appear on their own and do whatever they want. I don’t think I can really say I’ve done anything.”

“I see...” In other words, she wasn’t taking any responsibility for the actions of her fans. “But a suicide attack?”

“The word ‘fan’ is derived from ‘fanatic,’ isn’t it?” she said. “I think my most passionate fans would be capable of this.”

“They aren’t being summoned from our world, are they?” Hanakawa asked.

“Of course not. If they were, I could never ask them to explode like this. I believe they’re illusions made from magic.”

Though that didn’t seem accurate to Hanakawa, he didn’t argue further. If that’s what she wanted to believe, he was happy to leave her to it. The dragon had lost all interest in him. No matter how many humans it killed, no matter how many it trampled, there were always more appearing out of thin air. Though they weren’t individually strong, the explosions they caused, while individually small, quickly added up to something significant.

As resilient as the dragon’s hide was, it was clearly being injured by the explosions. Although it could regenerate rather quickly, it wasn’t quick enough to deal with the succession of blasts. Beyond that, regenerating those lost body parts had to be costing the dragon something.

“This reminds me of seeing honeybees cluster around a wasp to kill it with their body heat...”

As the dragon’s movements slowed, the fans stopped exploding. Instead, they swarmed over it, smothering it under their weight.

“I think we should probably step back a bit,” Sora said, turning away from

the dragon and starting to walk.

Glancing back from time to time to check on the situation, Hanakawa followed her. After a short time, an enormous explosion shook the dungeon. Despite how far they had walked, they could still clearly feel the shock wave from the blast pass over them, followed by a huge rush of mana.

Mana was what the Battlesong system used as “experience points.” When monsters died, it was released into the air, which could then be absorbed to make you stronger. This mana dissipated quickly, so being close to the source was important to maximize the benefits of defeating the monsters. Normally, the distance they had put between them and the dragon would cause them to lose out on most of the benefits, but the sheer amount of mana the dragon expelled as it died meant that it still reached them. Despite doing almost nothing, it was an unexpected windfall of growth for Hanakawa.

With confirmation that the dragon had been slain, the two returned to the scene of the battle. The creature was totally unrecognizable. Huge amounts of blood and flesh painted the floor, walls, and ceiling of the corridor. There was no way it would be regenerating from this state.

“That is...incredible...”

“I’m glad it worked out,” Sora said.

It had been at the sacrifice of countless numbers of her own fans, but Hanakawa didn’t bring that up. As Sora had said, they must have been born from magic somehow. It seemed like there were plenty of human bodies mixed in with the parts of the exploded dragon, but Hanakawa decided he was just seeing things.

“So, are you intending to clear Cavern Quest as well, Sora?”

“Technically I’m more interested in talking with Takatou, but I need to get to the final area to reach him, so it’s more or less the same thing.”

“I am looking for nothing more than escaping this place. Would you perhaps mind if I accompanied you?”

Hanakawa hesitated a little to ask. He had the distinct impression that he shouldn’t get involved with Sora, but even so, there was no way he was getting through a dungeon as dangerous as this one alone. If he wanted to survive, he needed friends.

“Of course. We’re classmates, so we need to help each other.”

“Then...I suppose we should head towards the next gate? Actually, do you have a Philosopher’s Stone?” Hanakawa recalled the scene at the beach. There had been plenty of players there, but he didn’t remember seeing Sora. There

were only a limited number of original Philosopher's Stones, so it would be difficult for her to get her hands on one of those. It was almost certain she had gotten one of the fakes made by the witch.

"I got stuck when I entered the prison area, but luckily, someone was willing to give me theirs."

"I...see! How lucky!"

A single party only needed one stone to pass through the gates, so if they had extras, they'd have no reason not to give them away. Hanakawa decided not to think about the issue any further.

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Chapter 6 — I Don’t Understand the Logic, but I’ll Trust You

Passing through the door in the shrine atop the pyramid, Yogiri and Tomochika found themselves in a small room.

“Not much here, huh?” Yogiri said.

“I guess it’s just a waiting room.”

The square room was about ten meters across, with a set of couches in the middle. For a single party, it was plenty big.

“I guess we should look around,” he said. There were no windows, and just a single door on the far wall. The left wall had two doors, while the right had one. The door they passed through to enter the room had disappeared, much like the gates in the Prison Area. The doors on the left led to bathrooms marked for “men” and “women.” Yogiri peeked into the men’s bathroom, which seemed perfectly clean and ordinary. According to Tomochika, the women’s bathroom wasn’t any different. The right door led into a small kitchenette. There were tanks for hot and cold water, as well as tea and tableware. The last door led out into nothing. Outside was just an endless white space.

“I guess we can’t go anywhere. You think we’ll fall if we step outside?” Tomochika asked.

Hmm. In any case, I cannot leave either. I attempted to pass through the walls to observe the exterior of the room, but was unable to, Mokomoko observed.

Yogiri tried to reach out through the door, but his hand was blocked. Though it appeared to be an empty white space, it seemed there was actually a wall there.

He closed the door and sat down on one of the couches.

“Hey, I know it’s kind of late to bring this up, but isn’t this kind of a bad situation?” Tomochika said, sitting down across from him.

“Seems that way. If they leave us trapped in here, we’ll just starve to death.”

“That sounds like a pretty effective way of beating you, doesn’t it?” In a situation like this, he wouldn’t sense killing intent from anyone since they were just leaving them stuck inside.

“Well...I suppose if it comes down to it, I can try something to get us out. But

it seems strange for him to whip everyone into a frenzy over trying to kill me if he was just going to let us starve to death. It's kind of annoying, but the Great Sage does seem to be enjoying the situation."

The Great Sage was watching everything unfold. There was no way he'd be satisfied with the two of them being left to starve to death.

"I guess that's true. They've put quite a bit of work into this whole thing already." Either Tomochika had accepted Yogiri's conjecture or simply turned defiant in the face of an inescapable fate, but regardless, she seemed to put her worries behind her. "Do you think we can eat these?" she asked, pointing at the snacks laid out on the table between them.

Do you not think that is being too naive? asked Mokomoko.

Yogiri picked up one of the cookies. He didn't get a bad feeling from it, so it was unlikely to be poisoned. He tried taking a bite. "Yeah, I think they're fine. They're pretty good too."

"Oh, you're right." Put at ease by Yogiri's confirmation, Tomochika began snacking herself.

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I believe it is common sense to avoid the food provided by an enemy...

"In that case, we wouldn't be able to eat *anything*," Yogiri replied. Ever since coming to this world, never mind joining Cavern Quest itself, they'd always been playing into the hands of the Sages. They could have thrown suspicion on anything they consumed in that time. He felt it was weird to suddenly start questioning the snacks in front of them now.

"Out of curiosity," Tomochika asked, "how would your power get us out of here if they did leave us to starve?"

"Hmm. In a normal prison, I'd just kill the bars or the walls to make a way outside."

"But we're floating in some sort of weird empty space, right?"

Indeed. We are in an entirely different place, unconnected to the pyramid that led us here.

"I don't know that much about physics or space and dimension stuff, so this is going to sound pretty dubious," Yogiri said. "Is that okay?"

"I'd be more confused if you *did* explain it to me with physics," Tomochika replied.

"I think this space is pretty close to where we just were. Or like a valley overlapping it."

"Okay, I'm already lost!" she exclaimed.

"Yeah, well, I guess there's no guarantee I'm right anyway. It's like how you can suddenly slip into another world when you're spirited away, right?"

"You make it sound like that's a normal thing that happens...but okay, I think I understand. Maybe."

"Anyway, if we assume it's something like that," Yogiri continued, "my power can kill the walls between this space and that one, making a hole that we can move through. That would take us back to the place we were before."

"That sounds like a pretty big 'if' to me."

"I can only explain things through my senses, after all. I don't know the logic behind it."

Though he had no proof he was correct or any way to prove his assumptions, she had no option but to assume that his vague conjecture was right. Explaining the logic that made a foreign world work was a losing proposition in the first place.

"So you think that you can at least get us back to where we were?" she asked.

"Probably. That's the feeling I get."

"That's pretty vague..."

“That’s why I said we should just wait for a while.”

“Yeah, I don’t understand the logic, but I’ll trust you.” Though he knew explaining it in a way she would understand would be difficult, it seemed he had at least convinced her he could do something about their situation.

“Oh, if you can do that, can you just break the wall or whatever between worlds and get us back home?” she asked again.

“Yeah.”

“You’re right, that would be too easy. It’s not like our worlds are that close—wait, you can?!”

“If we run out of other options, I can do it.” Yogiri frowned. From his perspective, that was the absolute last resort. He wanted to avoid doing it at all costs. “I guess I should explain now.”

Without knowing what was going to happen in the future, he couldn’t rule out the possibility of using this method as an emergency escape to get them home safely. If that happened, he likely wouldn’t have the time to explain it then.

“Doing it is simple enough. All I have to do is kill all the stuff between this world and ours.”

“The ‘stuff’?”

“I don’t know what it is either. But it’s got to be something. Maybe even other worlds.”

Well...we have acquired the coordinates of our home world, but we have no knowledge of how to use them, Mokomoko interjected. *It is impossible to tell exactly what kind of distance separates us now. I do not know how to convert the information into an intelligible measure of distance.*

“So...we don’t really want to do that, do we?” As Tomochika worked through the consequences that would entail, her face started to pale.

“Yeah. My power is mostly for protecting myself. I can’t kill everything in my way just because I want to go home. But if we’re left with no other options...”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to do that in *any* situation!” They didn’t know what exactly lay between them and their home world, but if it was possible there were any worlds with intelligent life there, that would mean annihilating all of them. That was far more of a burden than two high school students could bear. It was only natural that Tomochika would hesitate to do so.

“That’s why even though I don’t really know what’s happening right now, I figured we’re going to be wrapped up in whatever the Sages are doing.

Hopefully we can find a way home in the middle of that."

"Yeah. We do need to find a way home somehow..."

Right now, their objective was simply to clear Cavern Quest and make it back to the surface. Their prospects of getting home weren't looking good.

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Hanakawa and Sora progressed smoothly through the Prison Area. After defeating the dragon, the rest of the enemies on the floor were quite weak. It seemed that every few floors would have a boss monster of some sort, so they could expect things to be easy for a time. Even Hanakawa could handily dispatch the zombies and goblins that were attacking them now. Sora herself didn't seem to have much in the way of combat ability, so dealing with the small fry was left to him.

Well...if Sora's fans were to begin appearing to deal with enemies as weak as these, that would be problematic in its own way!

While they were certainly strong enough to defeat the enemies they now faced, there was no need to rely on suicide attacks now.

However...there is still one other problem...

At some point, Hanakawa's outfit had changed. On top of his usual kung fu outfit, he now wore a *happi* emblazoned with Sora's name, the kind of flashy coat often worn to idol concerts back in Japan.

"Sora?"

"What is it?"

"Er, would you perhaps know anything about this thing I am now wearing?"

"Isn't it something you made?"

"Uhh...never mind." There was no way an idol would make outfits for her fans designed to cheer her on. Sora must have assumed Hanakawa had made the clothes himself to support her.

Does this mean that Sora's Fanatic Fans ability might activate at some point and summon me to her side? Am I going to self-destruct to help her at some point?

So far, he still had full control of his body. However, as much as he had chosen to fight the enemies before them of his own accord, he couldn't say for sure that Sora's abilities hadn't influenced that decision.

"Ah, there are more." Sora pointed.

"Leave them to me!" As a pig-headed beastkin came around the corner in

front of them, Hanakawa held out his right arm. A ball of energy fired from his clenched fist, blowing away the pig monster. For enemies this weak, he didn't need to waste time gathering energy. The amount floating around him naturally was more than enough.

The battle was effortless, but it still introduced a new problem: he was now holding a glow stick in his right hand. The multicolored, glowing stick looked exactly like one you might see at a concert.

"Well, umm...I suppose should we find a dark place, it could come in handy...and it is not like it cost me anything."

Though it was becoming quite clear that Sora's powers were affecting him, Hanakawa decided to ignore it for now. If he were to leave Sora and encounter another boss, he'd be in quite a bit of trouble. Acting like one of her fans for a while was much safer.

Turning the corner where the beastkin had emerged, they found the gate they were looking for. Passing through the gate, they ascended to the next level. They emerged into a new corridor stretching off in a single direction. Hanakawa tensed up as he noticed three figures ahead of them.

"Oh, it's Akino!"

The trio turned to look at them. It was Ryouko, Carol, and Celestina, the concierge from the hotel.

"Hello," Sora greeted her two classmates. "I see you two made it here as well."

"Yeah, we figured we needed to join the hunt or else we'd get left behind," Carol explained.

"Could you at least pretend to be the least bit apologetic?! Your abandonment of *me* was as cruel as it gets!"

"Oh, sorry!" Carol replied instantly.

"So flippant! No substance at all! If Sora had not arrived, I would have certainly died!"

"No one lives forever, you know?" Carol answered.

"Uhh...you're really getting into it with that outfit, aren't you, Hanakawa?" Ryouko commented, apparently unable to think of anything meaningful to say.

It seemed these two really couldn't care less about him, so instead of pressing the issue and hurting his own feelings more, he gave up and changed the subject.

"I see you managed to unite with Miss Celestina."

"Yes. I was progressing alone through the pyramid, so I requested to travel with them," the concierge replied.

“Celestina is super strong!” Carol exclaimed. “She’s cutting through enemies like a hot knife through butter!”

“Then, perhaps the five of us should proceed together?”

“I don’t really mind, but what about you, Celestina?” Despite Hanakawa’s expectations, it seemed Carol had some reservations about joining back up with him.

“Wait, you actually have objections to us joining you?!”

“Of course you may travel with us,” Celestina replied. “You are all still guests of the hotel.” Celestina didn’t hesitate to accept them. The fact they had visited her hotel once should have been entirely irrelevant at this point, but it still seemed important to her.

“You use thread as a weapon, correct?” Hanakawa asked.

“Correct. It has been effective against all of the enemies I have encountered so far, so please rest assured.” As she spoke, a monster in the distance was sliced to pieces.

“Will it work against dragons?” Hanakawa pressed.

“Yes, the dragon was no issue. And I presume you had no difficulties with Gorbagion’s Four Heavenly Kings?”

“Four Heavenly Kings? I cannot say we encountered any such fellows. I cannot imagine forgetting an encounter with such a dim-witted-sounding individual.”

According to Celestina, a number of people claiming to be subordinates of the Demon Lord Gorbagion had been hunting other adventurers.

“I see. I suppose different gates lead to different routes, then,” Celestina concluded. “That said, it is quite likely we will encounter them again, so please remain on guard.”

“Even if we do, I have full faith in you, Celestina!” Hanakawa said. She had saved him immediately before his arrival in Cavern Quest. He had witnessed how strong her thread was, so he had full confidence in her abilities. Ryouko and Carol clearly couldn’t care less about him, and Sora seemed to recognize him only as one of her fans. It seemed Celestina, in her desire to protect the guests of her hotel, was the friendliest face here.

“Then let us proceed. The next gate appears to be in this direction.” With the aid of the Philosopher’s Stone to tell her where the next gate was, Celestina could then use her threads to scout the path ahead. With her help, escaping the Prison Area should have been easy.

The moment he thought that, Hanakawa suddenly lost consciousness.

Chapter 7 — I Wouldn’t Just Die with No Warning, Right?

The next thing Hanakawa knew, he was floating in the darkness, with no sense of self except his own consciousness. He couldn’t see anything, and he couldn’t feel his body. He tried to move his arms and legs but couldn’t tell if anything was happening. The situation felt so unreal that he thought it might have been a dream.

What just happened to me?!

The last thing he remembered was talking with Celestina. They were about to head to the next gate, but then he had ended up here.

Open my status window!

Once you got used to the Gift, you could open your status window without having to say anything out loud. But this time, nothing happened. The system UI was integrated into his vision, so if this wasn’t a dream, that meant he was currently blind.

This would not be some type of joke, would it? I cannot be dead, can I?

There was no pain. Rather, the total lack of sensation made it scarier.

Huh? Wait, seriously? Am I actually dead? There is no way, right? I wouldn’t just die with no warning, right? If I was going to die, it should have been protecting a beautiful young woman, casually creating a scene that will last in everyone’s hearts forever, and leaving behind some incredibly profound last words! There’s no way I can be dead! I know how absurd this world is, and that death could come for me at any moment, but being shoved off like this without a chance to leave my mark?! Dying with no warning is ridiculous!

As much as he ranted inside his own head, there was, of course, no one to answer.

No, no, no, no, no! This is impossible! I know there were a large number of problems starting to pile up, but it looked like everything was somehow going to work itself out in the end! Everything was going to be resolved, the problematic people like Takatou were going to leave, and I was going straight into a life supported by cheat powers!

No, it’s not too late! I need to calm down! Just because I’m dead doesn’t

mean I can give up! This is another world! Death is not necessarily the end! It is possible to revive the dead here, is it not? Just because I, as a Healer, don't know of any abilities that could do so doesn't mean they don't exist somewhere! I would, in fact, like to assume that they do! Even if not, there is still the option of returning as the undead! Even if I were to become nothing but a zombie, at least I would still be alive, in a sense! Or perhaps I should aim for lichdom, the highest rank of undead? Being reincarnated into another world as such a being and aiming for world domination and a personal harem is standard fare, is it not?

But in this situation, how am I supposed to become undead?! Someone! Please, summon my soul back! Hey! Hello?! Umm...wait, is this really the end?

Slowly, despair was starting to settle in. No matter how much he railed in his head, there was no sign of the outside world changing. He was just spinning his wheels, throwing words into the void. His sense of helplessness and powerlessness was only growing.

After some unknown amount of time, when he had finally given up hope, he finally noticed a faint light. Though it was hazy, he was starting to see. Everything moved quickly from there. He realized his eyes weren't in focus, so he desperately began trying to see what was in front of him. Slowly, the image became clearer.

"Thank goodness, you're awake!"

The first thing he saw was Celestina's face. Hanakawa was on his back, with the concierge sitting at his side, peering down at him. He could see Ryouko, Carol, and Sora standing off to the side. It seemed they hadn't been particularly concerned.

"Am I...alive?" he asked.

"Yes," Celestina answered. "Though it was not especially clear until now, I believe it is safe to say you are certainly alive."

"Honestly, it was so grotesque, it was hard to look at you," Carol said, looking back at him. Apparently, he had been on the verge of death before his consciousness rapidly returned.

"What exactly happened?"

"The Prison Area was suddenly destroyed," Celestina began. "It appears the attack came from outside, as my network of threads was unable to predict it. If it had struck us directly, I imagine we all would have died."

Hanakawa sat up. He could see outside. The walls that had enclosed them previously had disappeared. It was hard to tell the scope of the damage from

their current vantage point, but the fact that they could see outside meant a significant portion of the pyramid must have been destroyed. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all heavily damaged, but for some reason the area immediately around them was untouched.

"If we were not struck directly, then why did I lose consciousness?"

"Because of the shock wave from the blast, I imagine," Celestina answered. "I attempted to make a protective dome with my thread, but I was too slow, so a piece of rubble struck you..."

"There was a huge chunk of rock stuck in your head," Carol described gleefully. "Your eyes popped out and everything." She seemed far more interested in him now than when they had first reunited.

"Er, I will have to ask you to refrain from giving me such specific details."

"Then I suppose I shouldn't explain further," Celestina said.

"No, I can't bear to not know!" he cried.

"Make up your mind..." Ryouko sighed.

"Then I will explain in simple terms," Celestina continued. "We removed the rubble embedded in your body, stitched your body back together with my thread, and then did what healing we could. However, the damage to your brain was rather severe, so the only thing we could do was leave that to your own Auto Heal ability."

"As far as I know, if the head is destroyed, healing shouldn't work..." Hanakawa mumbled. Even in a world where people possessed souls or spirits, the faculties of thought, will, and memory were all governed by the brain. It was fundamentally different from other organs, which could simply resume their function if they were reconstructed. Hanakawa's experience as a Healer had taught him that rebuilding the brain wasn't capable of restoring a person's memories or personality.

"Perhaps it is thanks to the Philosopher's Stone," Celestina proposed. "For us, it serves only as a key to pass through the gates, but with one in your body, it may cause your healing magic to ascend to a new level."

"I see... I also absorbed that portion of Luu's arm. There may be some possibility of godly powers at work as well... Wait, does this not mean I am technically immortal?"

"I would not be too confident in that," Celestina replied. "It may be that things only worked out this time because I was here to help."

"I-I suppose you are right. Even if I were to discover I was immortal, I would not be so careless with my life."

As they spoke, Hanakawa's condition gradually improved. Returning to his feet, he looked around. Though it was impossible to tell what had happened, it was clear to see at a glance that some unparalleled destruction had occurred. Damage had been done not just to the pyramid, but to the entire island. With the walls gone, Hanakawa could step up to the newly fashioned cliff and look down to see the sea below them. To the left and right were nothing but water, which looked to be in the grips of a storm. Something enormous must have passed through the area, erasing everything it touched.

"The fact that any of the pyramid survived at all seems to be a miracle..." Hanakawa murmured. Despite essentially having been killed, he had to admit they had been quite lucky. "But at this rate, the gates will have been destroyed. How will we progress?"

"What do you mean?" Carol said. "Now we can go anywhere we want." She then leaped off the edge.

"Carol?!"

Though he expected her to fall, she instead launched upward. Carefully leaning out over the ledge, Hanakawa looked up after her and saw her climbing the side of the pyramid using a grappling hook to ascend to the next level.

"Getting through the pyramid was a struggle before because we had to do it from the inside. If we can climb the outside of it, then it becomes really easy!" she called back.

"I see! But in that case, would it not have been more intelligent to climb from the outside right at the beginning?"

"Hey, no dwell on past!"

"Can you stop reverting to your poor language skills, then?"

"At first, climbing the outside of the pyramid was impossible," Celestina added. "Right now...it seems there will be no problem."

"You investigated it with your threads?" Hanakawa asked.

"Correct. I can now get them to the top." Before entering the pyramid, she had investigated the outside of the structure. Her search had turned up a barrier a certain distance off the ground, preventing any further climbing.

"So, that being the case, how are we supposed to climb?" Hanakawa asked. "Are you going to carry me, Carol?"

"Please leave it to me," Celestina said, stepping off the ledge. At this point, no one expected she would fall. Sure enough, she hovered in the air, her threads supporting her body and creating footing for her. "Carrying four people should be easy enough. Are you ready?"

Hanakawa, Ryouko, and Sora nodded together. Their bodies were gently lifted off the ground, drawn outside the pyramid. Far below them, the sea still raged in the aftermath of whatever chaos had passed through. A shudder ran through Hanakawa's legs, prompting him to focus his attention upwards.

"Oh, I can make it on my own, so don't worry about it." Using her grappling hooks, Carol was making smooth progress up the side of the pyramid, with the other four gently ascending behind her.

Without any obstacles, they made it to the roof. From the top, they could clearly see the extent of the damage. Half of the once perfectly square rooftop was missing, signs of damage everywhere.

There were a fair number of people gathered there. They seemed clearly on guard against each other based on the way they stood scattered apart. They must have been adventurers here to challenge the last boss. It seemed they had also taken the opportunity to climb the pyramid from the outside now that it had been destroyed.

"Didn't they say there was another area after the prison?" Carol asked, looking around. There didn't seem to be anything here. The field's name was Castle in the Sky. Looking up, they could see a large cloud, so the castle may have resided within it, but there was no obvious way to get inside.

"That witch lady said there was an Antechamber Area after the Prison Area, did she not?" Hanakawa recalled. "Something about a waiting room while other adventurers gathered. Is that perhaps what this place is?"

"It doesn't look that way to me. It doesn't look that different from the area we just passed through." As Sora said, it looked like this was just a continuation of the Prison Area.

"Then what are we supposed to do now?" Hanakawa had thought making it to the end of the Prison Area would have been enough.

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Now that they were here, he had no clue what they were supposed to do.

“Looking around...it appears most people are rather calm. They are only waiting, so I suppose we should do the same?” Celestina said, just as calm as the other adventurers.

“I suppose so,” Hanakawa agreed. “There is nothing we can do anyway.”

“Then I will take my leave here.”

“Huh? Where are you going?” Hanakawa called out as Celestina began walking away.

“It appears everyone is divided into their party groups. There is nothing here now, but it is possible that individual parties will be in contest with each other. I have no desire to bring harm to you as guests of the hotel, but if it becomes necessary... That said, even if it does, it would be impolite for me to attack you all without warning. So I feel it would be best to separate here.”

With that excuse, he had no reason to stop her and could only watch as she departed.

“Ah! Now that I think about it, Ryouko, Hanakawa, and I are all in a party, aren’t we?” Carol said.

“Perhaps it is best if I leave as well,” Sora suggested before stepping away.

“Are we not in trouble if those two become our enemies?” Hanakawa asked.

“Yeah, if we’re against Celestina, I guess we don’t stand a chance, do we?” Carol replied.

“I think the same could be said about Sora...” Hanakawa added.

“Really?” Ryouko said. “I don’t remember Akino being that strong.”

Back during their experience in the Underworld beneath Manii’s capital, Sora had engaged in combat with them. While she was capable of handling the enemies on the upper levels without issue, Ryouko didn’t think she compared much to the combat professions like Samurai or Ninja.

“Well, you see,” Hanakawa began. “And so on and so forth.”

“Could you explain properly please?” the two girls sighed.

Hanakawa explained how Sora’s fans appeared out of thin air when she was in trouble.

“So in other words, we never know when Hanakawa will suddenly betray us!” Carol exclaimed.

“Ah! I suppose from an objective viewpoint it does appear that way!” Hanakawa was still wearing the cheering uniform with Sora’s name on it. He hurriedly threw it and the glow stick to the ground.

“I don’t know if changing your outfit solves the problem here,” Ryouko said.

“Don’t worry about it.” Carol waved off her concerns. “As long as we know he might betray us, there’s no problem!”

“I would never do such a thing...or so I would like to say, but I do not even know where these clothes came from or why I was wearing them, so I suppose I cannot say for certain.” It was quite possible he would suddenly turn into one of her fans and sacrifice his life to help her. He couldn’t even trust himself at this point.

“Either way, we can hold on to him until we actually have to fight her.”

Before Hanakawa could ask what that was supposed to mean, two people came flying towards the pyramid.

“That’s the Sage...” Hanakawa murmured.

One was the Sage Van, who had embedded a Philosopher’s Stone in Hanakawa. The other was a boy a little smaller than Van, wearing a mask.

Chapter 8 — Do You Really Think That Counts as Hiding?

Van and another boy landed on the roof of the half-ruined pyramid. The rooftop had likely once been square, but now it had been shaved down to a long rectangle. The two new arrivals touched down at the center of what floor remained.

“Hey everyone. I’m Mitsuki, the Great Sage who manages the other Sages. I know it’s a little rude to be wearing a mask like this, but please forgive me. Normally it doesn’t bother me, but showing my face to large crowds can be a bit of a problem sometimes.” The boy, Mitsuki, spoke with a gentle voice. The mask hid his age, but judging by his voice, he was still quite young. “So, as for what’s happening next... Oh, sorry, I kind of took over, didn’t I? Do you mind?”

“Whatever. Do what you want,” Van replied with a sigh. Cavern Quest was Van’s creation, so management of the last quest should have fallen to him.

The scattered adventurers slowly gathered around the two Sages, Hanakawa and the two girls included. There were some who listened from a short distance, perhaps still on guard against their peers. The Great Sage’s voice carried quite far, so there was no need to listen from up close.

I recognize a good number of these people...

There were a number of people who had already left an impression on Hanakawa here. The witch Evon was one—the woman who had multiplied the Philosopher’s Stones and handed them out on the beach.

The next was a pair he remembered seeing in the Garula Canyon before the world was reset. One was a woman in extremely revealing clothing, the other a young, lanky man. They hadn’t been at the beach, so they must have found another way to the top of the pyramid. Back when Hanakawa met them the first time, the woman had been firing lasers indiscriminately in all directions, so she seemed plenty dangerous. The man didn’t seem like much of a threat, and in fact, Hanakawa felt a small kind of affinity for him.

“The succubus does not seem to be present. Do you think she failed to make it through?” Hanakawa asked.

“Probably,” Carol answered. “She may have been strong, but given what

happened to the pyramid, that wouldn't have helped her."

"Quite true. Well, everyone participating seems to have powers that feel like cheating, so a good number of them managed to survive even that...but considering all those who died, does it not make it impressive that I somehow survived?"

"Yes, beginner's luck! Luck of the draw! Blind luck and nothing else! Your abilities didn't have anything to do with it!" Carol retorted.

"I am not sure all of those idioms are quite appropriate here...but regardless, it appears there are some nonhumans among us, no?"

Another group now present that hadn't been on the beach was a party of clearly nonhuman adventurers. The party was made up of a boy with horns growing from his forehead, a huge man with skin like stone, a slender man with three pairs of eyes, a woman with hair that covered her face entirely and was long enough to reach the ground, and another black-haired boy wearing a T-shirt and jeans.

"I recall seeing that horned boy previously. I believe he was one of the first to receive a Philosopher's Stone from Van. Perhaps they are Gorbagion's Four Heavenly Kings?"

The original Philosopher's Stones had been divided up among six people and a dog. Hanakawa had been part of that group, along with the horned boy.

"Hm? Wait, were parties not limited to four people? That appears to be a group of five..."

"Just because they're standing together doesn't mean they're all in one party," Carol said.

"I suppose so. There is always the possibility one of them is sort of like a familiar as well." If he really wanted to press the issue, he'd have to ask about the numerous fans who had appeared around Sora as well. Worrying about it now seemed like a waste of effort.

"Ah, looks like there are more people...coming," Carol noted, looking behind them.

Uneasy about her suspicious tone, Hanakawa turned to look and immediately began to sputter in disbelief. The person standing behind him was so unexpected he lost all composure.

The world had been reset. Time had been rewound. Many of those who had died in the previous world had returned to life. Even so, he had never expected to see this one here.

It was a monster. Though it had a humanoid shape, it was black from head to

toe, covered entirely in blades. The sinister creature was like an incarnation of bloodlust, one very familiar to Hanakawa.

"Why would the Hedgehog be here?!" Back during his brief journey with Aoi, he had encountered the monstrosity in the Garula Canyon. "And wait, is that Luu? Why is *she* here?!" Though the impact was deadened by the previous sight of the Hedgehog, Hanakawa also noticed a group of four women standing behind it: the goddess Luu, her supposed daughter Hiruko, an elf, and a warrior of some sort. The Hedgehog should have been going after Luu, but right now it showed no signs of hostility.

"I must admit I am quite curious about what has led to these developments...but as they say, no curse comes from a sleeping god."

As its appearance indicated, the Hedgehog was a violent creature. There was no telling how it would react if he approached it. Hanakawa slipped behind Carol in an attempt to hide.

"Do you really think that counts as hiding?" Carol quipped.

With the Hedgehog in the lead, the group of five approached the Great Sage.

"Yo. You're going by Luu now, right? Long time no see."

"Mitsuki..."

Hanakawa had no idea what kind of relationship the two had, but he could tell there was something abnormal in the air between them, as expressions of love and hate warred on Luu's face.

"I'm sure you have a lot to say, but can you hold on to it for now?" Mitsuki said. "If you attack me, I'll just run away anyway. If you play the game, I'll probably save some time for you later."

Apparently satisfied by his offer, Luu said nothing more.

"Okay. It looks like there might be a few more people coming in late, so maybe we should wait a bit."

"I don't think you need to bother," Van said. "Anyone who couldn't make it to the rooftop as of now should just be disqualified."

The last boss battle was supposed to be a battle royale between the seven parties that possessed a Philosopher's Stone. However, there were far more than seven stones now, so there was no hope of sticking to that plan.

"Okay. Then, congratulations. Everyone here has qualified for the last battle in the final area. We'll lose all the tension if we wait forever, so I'll cut it off there. Anyone else who shows up is disqualified...though I guess there's no point in telling you guys that, is there?"

It seemed most of the people on the beach had made it to the rooftop, as well

as a fair number who had taken other routes, so there was a large number of parties present.

"Normally, you'd go into the Antechamber Area in the order you arrived, but the door got destroyed, so I'll just explain the rules here."

Though he wasn't there to hear it, the same explanation would be given to Yogiri.

"The final area is in the clouds above us. The field is called Castle in the Sky, so of course there's actually a castle up there, but it's not super important. We're going to be holding a tournament. How many people do we have now?"

"Seventy parties," Van answered.

"We'll have you guys fight each other, with the winners moving on. Once about half of you are gone, we'll start the next round. The numbers don't add up nicely, though, so we'll only accept thirty-two winners. That'll make it six rounds in all. Though, if any of you manage to beat Yogiri Takatou before the finals, that will end the tournament right there."

The main goal of the tournament was to kill Yogiri so the world could be reset again. There was no point in continuing once Yogiri was dead. That said, the fact he was setting it up as a winner-goes-on tournament meant that he must have had some desire to watch the fights themselves.

"Well, depending on the matchup, I think we have...absolutely no chance at all!" Hanakawa exclaimed. Ryouko and Carol were strong, but they were nowhere near the levels of the cheat-powered individuals they had met on the beach. They would be hopeless against virtually anyone here.

"This is...a problem. I had hoped we could reunite with Takatou first..." Ryouko said, her face darkening.

"Ha ha ha! If your goal is to help Takatou win, then meeting him would mean we'd have to let him kill us!"

"This is not a laughing matter!" Hanakawa chastised Carol. "Excuse me! Is it perhaps possible for us to bow out of the competition early?!" Hanakawa asked, hurriedly approaching Mitsuki.

"That's a funny thought. If you're that funny, I'd rather you stayed in." Though it was hard to tell through the mask, the Sage's tone suggested he found genuine humor in what Hanakawa had said.

"Ah, umm! Losing does not necessitate death, does it? After all, you said nothing about these being fights to the death!"

"Hmm. The point of this isn't just to watch people die, so whatever means you come up with, if both sides can agree on a winner, that's fine with me."

That laid the foundation for the tournament. The rules of each match would be decided at the start of that match. If no agreement could be reached, the match would end when one party was wiped out. Parties were freely able to surrender and withdraw.

“Van, can you open a door for us?” Mitsuki asked.

“Sure.” Van snapped his fingers, causing a board to pop out of the ground. The surface of the board was pitch-black, similar to the gates in the pyramid. “When you go through this gate, you’ll appear somewhere in the final area. The placement is random, but it’s been set up so you won’t appear too close to another party. Once everyone is through, the round starts,” he explained.

“Hey, wasn’t there something about a prize for those who arrived first?” the horned boy from earlier said.

“Yeah, I said I’d give you powers. But do you really want to talk about what powers I’ll give you where everyone can hear?”

“I don’t need any powers. I want something else.”

“Oh, really? If it sounds interesting, I’ll hear you out.”

“One of your friends is that guy with glasses, right?” the boy asked. “I need to kill that guy. Tell me where he is.”

“The guy with glasses? I suppose that would be Shirou. He’s in the management area of the game, so players can’t get to him.” Mitsuki thought for a moment. “So let’s do this. Let’s have all of the Sages involved with Cavern Quest join the tournament!”

“What?!” Van jumped like a bucket of cold water had been dumped on him.

“Works for me,” the horned boy replied. “As long as I keep winning, I’ll get to him eventually. And if I get to kill you too, all the better,” he finished, glaring at Van. He still seemed to hold a grudge against Van for implanting the Philosopher’s Stone in him.

“You’re not busy with anything else, are you?” Mitsuki asked.

“Well...I guess there’s no point worrying about running the game anymore,” Van conceded.

“Even if you lose and die somehow, the world is going to be reset anyway, so you’ll be fine,” Mitsuki said nonchalantly. It seemed he was operating under the assumption that another reset was guaranteed. Whatever happened, Yogiri would die in the end and the world would be returned to the way it was before.

“You say that as if there’s no danger at all...but hey, if it’ll help you enjoy the game, then sure.” Though he was quite shocked, it didn’t seem Van was terribly bothered by the idea.

“Hey, can I say something too?” a young man in a full bodysuit asked. His clothing was clearly made from a smooth material that didn’t exist in this world, and it had solid chunks of armor placed around it. To Hanakawa, it looked like sci-fi battle gear.

“Sure. But I’m guessing this isn’t about the powers either?”

“Not really. My power is too big in scope. If I use it normally, it’ll destroy the planet. It’s not really going to work for one-on-one matches. I want to make sure it’s okay if I kill everyone else at once.”

“I see. Putting aside whether you’re actually capable of doing that, that would make the round system irrelevant. How about instead we set it up so that you fight in partitioned-off spaces, so you can’t affect the other matches going on? Is that possible?” Mitsuki asked, turning to Van.

“Sure. Cavern Quest is already set up with channels. So...I’ll make it so that when the parties are within ten meters of each other, the match will start, I guess,” Van answered.

“In that case,” Hanakawa interrupted, “what would happen if more than two parties came within ten meters of each other at once?”

“Working out every small detail now would take forever,” Van replied. “I’ll just deal with the fringe cases as they come up.”

Content with the conversation ending there, the Sage headed for the black gate, passing through and disappearing. In short order, the other adventurers began passing through the gate as well. In hopes of securing any tiny advantage they could, they wanted to get in early and see as much of the battle area as possible before the fighting started. But none of them seemed especially hurried. They were happy to patiently wait in line. It seemed they were all fully confident in their own abilities. They all thought they had a way to deal with Yogiri’s powers and defeat him.

All we hoped for was to reunite with Sir Takatou. How did we end up embroiled in this whole affair?

Had they made a mistake somewhere? Looking back, Hanakawa had plenty of regrets about his past actions, but for now it seemed his only option was to go with the flow. Passing through the gate, he emerged in a forest.

“He said we’d be up in the clouds, but this hardly looks like that kind of fantasy realm, does it?” Carol said.

“I don’t see the others who entered before us,” Ryouko commented as she looked around.

“Be that as it may...why exactly is the Great Sage with us?”

Hanakawa, Carol, and Ryouko had appeared beside each other, meaning they had probably been brought through as a party. However, in addition to those three, Mitsuki was also standing alongside them.

“I said I’d give you guys powers, right? It’s not really a conversation you’ll want to have in front of the others, so I decided to come to you personally.”

“Aha, I am more than happy to receive them, but did you not say the prize was for the first ten to arrive? I believe we arrived rather late, did we not?” By the time Hanakawa’s group had made it to the rooftop, most of the other adventurers had already gathered. The only ones who had arrived after them were Luu’s group.

“That’s true, but a lot of people said they didn’t want anything.”

“Then I want one! I absolutely want one!”

“Anyway, going down the list, I made it to you guys,” the Great Sage said. “There are two prizes left. So going by the order you made it to the rooftop...that would be you two.”

Either he remembered offhand or had access to that information, because after thinking for a brief moment, Mitsuki pointed to Carol and Hanakawa. If they were going by the order they stepped onto the rooftop, that would have been correct. Carol had used her grappling hooks to get there first, and the first one Celestina had carried onto the roof was Hanakawa.

“So, what kind of power would you like?”

“Hmm...” Carol sank into thought. Being suddenly presented with the offer, it was only natural she’d need some time to think about it.

“Could you make up your mind in five minutes? The fighting is supposed to start, so I don’t want to hold things up too much.”

“Wait! Is that five minutes for both of us combined?!” Hanakawa exclaimed.

“You can think at the same time, can’t you?”

“I suppose, but—”

“We can ask for any power we like, right?” Carol asked.

“Sure, but remember the whole point is to come up with something that will help you defeat Yogiri Takatou. If it’s totally unrelated to that, I’m not sure I’m willing to do it.”

“So, for example, if I were to ask to become the most dashing individual in the universe and for the world to be restructured such that there is no greater joy for others than to perform adult acts with me, you would refuse?” Hanakawa asked.

“I’m really starting to think we should have killed this guy a lot earlier...”

Ryouko muttered, looking down at Hanakawa with disgust.

"All right, I've made up my mind!" said Carol. "I want to be able to nullify others' powers! I want it to work on anything, even on powers granted by you!"

"Done." Mitsuki nodded.

"That will allow me to nullify any power this piece of garbage...ahem, that Hanakawa chooses, right?"

"I guess so. That's how the rules work. Here, you can read this to see the details." Mitsuki passed Carol a small slip of paper.

"Wh-What is this?! How am I supposed to select an ability to get revenge for the oppression I have suffered at your hands up until now?!"

"I had a bad feeling about it, so I'm really glad I decided to make it to the rooftop before you," Carol replied.

"Then what am I supposed to pick?!"

"Hmm...looking at this, it seems there are quite a few restrictions on my power, so you better think carefully about what you want. But if you try to use it on us, I'll just disable it anyway!"

"Limits?! I thought we were permitted any power we wished! Adding limits to it afterwards is hardly fair!" Hanakawa protested.

"That's easy to say, but I can't give you powers that are logically impossible, and I can't supply you unlimited energy forever, right?"

So, what am I to do? I have never thought seriously about this issue. Should I think of a power to kill Yogiri? If I succeed, surely the Great Sage will reward me afterwards. But no matter what kind of combat power I think of, it will only lead to Takatou killing me in retaliation! I need something more clever to deal with him.

Ah, perhaps I should not think too deeply on it. Maybe an ability that allows me to avoid attacking him at all is preferable. In that case, a multipurpose ability of some sort would be preferred. That would be more effective, would it not? However, a jack-of-all-trades is a master of none. I fear that might lead to unexpected pitfalls somewhere.

And there are limits that will be placed on the power as well! And it will take some sort of resource to use? How am I supposed to make a decision with that in mind? Ahhhh! I need more time to think!

Anyway! Whether Takatou returns home or dies, what is important for me is what comes after! I need something that will help me survive this coming conflict and everything that comes after! But what kind of power would that be?!

"Time's up." Mitsuki interrupted Hanakawa's train of thought.

“Uh...huh?”

“I don’t want to make the others wait any longer, and I’m already bored.”

“No! What will happen to my new power, then?!” Hanakawa cried.

“Giving you nothing at all would be too depressing, so I just picked something at random for you. Here, this will tell you how to use it.” Mitsuki handed him a slip of paper. The moment Hanakawa took it, Mitsuki vanished.

“Last Boss Quest, Final Stage, Round One: Start!”

A message appeared in the air above them as an announcement played, signaling the start of the tournament.

Chapter 9 — Interlude: It’s Morning! You’re Going to Be Late for School!

This is a story from another world. In concrete terms, it was a world very similar to modern-day Japan, though it had no connection to the world Yogiri and Tomochika came from. Either it was a parallel world, or perhaps at some point in the past it had branched off from the same world and become slightly different. Perhaps it arrived at a similar place entirely by coincidence, life and culture evolving in the same way entirely by chance.

In any case, it was the world where the one who would one day become the Great Sage Mitsuki was born.

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Mitsuki opened his eyes to see the face of a young girl directly above him.

“Uhh...good morning?” Still half asleep, it took him a moment to realize what was happening, but it seemed for some reason Yumeno was sitting on top of him while he slept. She was staring at his face from uncomfortably close, but when he started staring back, she hurriedly sat back up.

“G-G-Good morning! Get up, Mitsuki! You’re going to be late for school!”

“Hm? Oh. Thanks.”

Looking at the clock on the wall, he saw it wasn’t quite time to get up yet. In only a few minutes his alarm clock would wake him, so he would have been fine without her help, but he felt he should thank her for coming to wake him up anyway.

“Hey! What are you two doing?!” Still in a sleepy haze, Mitsuki heard his window open as his neighbor Rio stormed into the room. The balcony outside his window connected with the neighbors’, so they could easily come and go between them.

“Morning. She was just here to wake me up.”

“That’s right! I was just waking him up!” Yumeno echoed.

“If you were just waking him up, why are you on top of him?!” Rio demanded.

“Actually, that’s a good question.” Gently pushing Yumeno off of him, Mitsuki finally sat up.

“Jeez! I can’t take my eyes off you for a second!”

“By the way, why are you here, Rio?” Mitsuki asked.

“I-I just came to wake you up! If I leave you be, you’ll sleep all day!”

“I mean, I have an alarm clock...” However, he didn’t think of these two as a bother. He was thankful they were trying to help. “I’m going to get changed; can you two step out for a minute?”

“Ah, sorry!”

The pair stepped out of his room, though he didn’t know why Rio went downstairs when she had come in through the window. After changing into his school uniform, he headed downstairs where his maid, Akane, was waiting.

“Good morning. Your breakfast is ready.”

“Okay, thanks.”

“I could have made breakfast for him. Why do you need her?” Yumeno mumbled, though considering her culinary “skills,” he was quite glad to have Akane make breakfast instead.

Mitsuki’s parents had gone abroad for work and wouldn’t be back for some time. In their absence, they had hired Akane to take care of him. Normally one would think of a hired housekeeper as a middle-aged woman of some sort, but for some reason, the maid they had hired was close to Mitsuki’s age and had decided to live in the house alongside him, taking care of all the housework herself.

“Wait, why is Rio eating breakfast with us?!” Yumeno protested.

“It’s fine; she’s here anyway,” Mitsuki said.

Finishing breakfast, Mitsuki headed to the front door and left for school. His stepsister Yumeno, childhood friend Rio, and live-in maid Akane, now also wearing school uniforms, were in tow. All of them attended the same school. The moment they made it outside, they were greeted by a sleek black luxury car waiting for them.

“Mitsuki, sir! Salutations on this fine morning!” Standing beside the car was his classmate, Reika. Saying she was just like she looked may have come across as a bit mean-spirited, but she was indeed a rich young heiress.

“Reika, I don’t mind if you want to walk to school with us, but bringing a car isn’t a great idea.”

“He’s right!” Yumeno declared. “The roads are cramped enough as it is! You should have thought this through!”

“It is no matter! I have already acquired assent from the people of this neighborhood.”

“Except I live in this neighborhood, and you didn’t talk to me at all!” Rio snapped back.

“My, how rude of me!” Reika replied. “I thought it would be sufficient to speak only with the owners of the houses, but I suppose I will need to be more thorough in the future.”

“What’s that for?” Mitsuki asked as Reika pulled out a stack of bills.

“I need to acquire Miss Rio’s approval, do I not?” she said boldly.

“I don’t need money from you! Let’s go!” Rio said, storming off. Mitsuki followed close behind as other girls from the neighborhood joined the entourage one by one. It was kind of a strange sight, but it was an everyday thing for Mitsuki. That everyday occurrence was about to be interrupted, though.

A bolt of lightning from the blue, despite there being not a cloud in the sky, struck the ground a few steps ahead of him. If he had stepped a little farther forward, he would have died. The asphalt shattered, cracks running out in every direction. A young girl wearing a white robe now stood where the lightning had struck.

“Ah! Of course he looks even better from up close, but this aroma too! I can’t get enough!”

The girls around Mitsuki froze. Lightning had struck right in front of them. The shock of that would leave them confused regardless, but the fact that a girl had emerged from the strike had them even more bewildered.

“Now, I suppose I cannot afford to waste much time. I am sure others will have noticed your awakening by now. I will need to take you away before anyone else comes to interfere.”

The beautiful young girl approached. Mitsuki was powerless to do anything but watch as she stepped closer. Before she made it to him, the chaos continued with another explosion and cloud of dust. Judging by the aftermath, it seemed like something had struck the first girl and sent her flying to the side. She had been sent through walls and houses, leaving a trail of destruction in her wake. It felt like a miracle that Mitsuki and the girls around him hadn’t been injured, as close as she had been to them when she was struck. It looked like rubble from the blast was going to hit them, but it dodged around them instead.

“What is going on?” Rio muttered.

“I have no idea.” Mitsuki echoed her thoughts.

“I do not know who you are, but I have to praise your nerve if you are willing

to get in my way!”

“I was hoping that would have been enough to put you down for good. I really wanted that to settle things.”

The girl in white seemed impressed by the woman in red who emerged after, wearing a strained smile.

“Fear not. Now that you have brought this fight, I will take it quite seriously. This won’t end until you accept total defeat!”

“I wanted to finish this quickly so I could leave right away...but it looks like it’s not just the two of us anymore,” the woman in red said, looking behind the girl in white. Mitsuki turned to follow her gaze, finding a woman in blue descending from the sky in a pillar of blinding light.

“What a pain...” the girl in white said, clicking her tongue.

Mitsuki couldn’t help but agree.

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Worlds existed within Celestial Foundations, and these Foundations existed within the “sea.” The sea was enormous, containing countless such Foundations, but it was not hard to imagine the existence of worlds outside of it. There were worlds, the space outside them, and another place beyond all of that. Worlds with different fundamental laws all existed nested within each other. That was apparently the structure of the universe. “Apparently,” because it was impossible to observe the entire thing.

That said, there were some who treated this as all that existed, since it comprised the entirety of the territory perceptible to the most intelligent life forms on these worlds. For convenience, the term “Ultimate Ensemble World” referred to this collection of worlds. Many of them followed similar laws, while many more followed entirely different ones. No through line could be established that applied to all of them.

In short, what counted as rare and exceptional in one world was perfectly natural in another, but there were still things that counted as exceptional in all worlds. These were referred to as “exceptions.” The name was nothing special, only enough to evoke the intended meaning within the proper context. There were few enough such phenomena that they needed no special name. None were particularly impressive on their own, notable only for having a characteristic that was applicable across all worlds.

The Great Sage Mitsuki was one such “exception.” His unique trait was to be

loved by everyone and everything. The effect varied depending on who it was applied to. On men, it often didn't manifest as much of anything, but it was particularly pronounced on goddesses.

Goddesses, the females among the gods. As creators and rulers of entire worlds, it seemed a bit strange that they would take the sex characteristics of their creations, but it was possible to explain this through the strong anthropic principle.

That was what the gods of the Ensemble World were like. Worlds that followed a similar pattern were more convenient for those gendered gods, or in another way of putting it, because the Ensemble was observed to contain beings that existed in a gendered system, even the gods it produced would necessarily exist within that structure.

These goddesses, the greatest of intelligent life forms, took notice of Mitsuki. They would eventually come to be known as Alexia, the UEG, and Luu, and their conflict over him would lead Mitsuki to a bizarre fate.

If there had been only one, Mitsuki would have been taken captive and turned into their object of affection for eternity. But with three, a war broke out around him instead. They were three goddesses of equal power. None of them could directly interfere with Mitsuki, so the winner of his affection was entirely up to him.

With no other recourse, the three goddesses called a truce, allowing all of their interactions with Mitsuki to be observed by the others and to be restricted in how much time they could spend with him.

After this agreement, the three goddesses did everything in their power to win Mitsuki's favor. They gave him gifts, they gave him power, they granted his every wish. The world around him changed drastically. The continents changed shape, and the people and cultures populating them were totally transformed. If it was to make Mitsuki happy, they would do anything.

They were wildly obsessed with him, quite literally driven mad by love. If they could earn Mitsuki's love, they didn't want anything else. They offered him everything, with no consideration for themselves. It did not take long for them to reach the tipping point, Alexia being first.

At first, it seemed she had lost. But at that point, the other goddesses had been giving Mitsuki more of their power. Say, for example, that each goddess had one hundred points of power. In their contest for Mitsuki's affection, they had each given Mitsuki ten. While they wanted to grant him power to earn his favor, giving him too much would be ceding their ability to contest the other

goddesses. So they had slowly and gradually given power to him...until one day Alexia suddenly gave up eighty points of her power to him.

That left her at ten points, the UEG and Luu at ninety, and Mitsuki himself at one hundred and ten. Alexia had greatly weakened herself, and it looked like she had no chance in the conflict any longer. However, it also resulted in Mitsuki having more power than the goddesses.

Though everything had revolved around him, Mitsuki had been no more than a spectator up until that point. Now things were different. While Mitsuki was used to members of the opposite sex constantly falling for him, a situation like this was too much. He lent all of his power to Alexia, feeling sympathy for her after she had given up everything she had.

The truce between the goddesses collapsed back into war. When their powers had been more or less even, any such conflict would develop into an eternal deadlock, but now that Alexia was a full third stronger than the other two, it was over in no time. If the other two had cooperated, they may have been able to resist her, but with them still in conflict, Alexia was able to defeat them one at a time.

Mitsuki had been freed. Though he had been granted nigh omnipotence, at heart he was just a boy with good looks. With far more power than he could handle, a long life of trial and error in figuring out how to make use of those abilities followed.

ACT 2

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Chapter 10 — Yogiri Takatou Is Right Here!!!

Sitting in the Antechamber Area, Yogiri and Tomochika heard a voice explaining the rules of the tournament. According to the explanation, it would be a battle royale, with the final surviving party being the winner. A match would start when two parties approached within ten meters of each other, at which point they'd both be moved to another channel to fight. The winner of the match would be moved on to the next round. Victory counted as killing the entire opposing party, but the two parties could also agree on another method of deciding a winner if they wished. It was also permitted for one side to surrender.

It was different from the last boss battle they had been promised when embarking on the quest, but also wasn't quite the mass fight to the death among over a hundred parties that Van had mentioned just earlier. At any rate, it seemed like this would lead to a faster conclusion, which was helpful. That was Yogiri's opinion on the rules.

"So...maybe we don't actually have to kill each other?" Tomochika asked.

"I don't think it'll be that easy. They're here to kill me, after all...although, in that case, if you kill me—"

"I'm not worried about saving myself here," Tomochika replied, immediately cutting him off.

"If I die, the world will be reset, so I guess there's no point in worrying about what happens if I lose."

"I can't really imagine you losing in the first place. Well, okay, I can imagine it, but it doesn't sound realistic."

"I might lose because of some quirk of the rules, but I don't think I'd die."

"Does that mean you're free to use your powers now?" she asked. Yogiri only used his powers to protect himself. But with this rule set, there could be a need for him to use his powers more proactively.

"I'm not really fond of the idea, but if they're joining the battle of their own free will, they've got to be ready to die, right? I think of it like that." They had likely all come with the intention of killing Yogiri, in which case using his power here was only to protect himself. Things hadn't changed all that much.

“Okay. I’ll make sure I’m ready for that too.”

In truth, Tomochika didn’t have to do anything. If Yogiri was using his power, then all the responsibility lay with him. But even so, he was thankful for her attitude towards the situation.

“Last Boss Quest, Final Stage, Round One: Start!”

A message appeared in the air above them as an announcement played, signaling the start of the tournament. It seemed all of the participants had gathered. As he went to stand up, Yogiri noticed something sitting on the table that hadn’t been there before. It was a Philosopher’s Stone.

“Huh? Why is this here?”

It seemed Tomochika hadn’t seen it appear either. “I guess they really want us to have one with us?” she suggested.

Yogiri didn’t know what it was for, but he supposed it would be necessary for something in the future. He put the stone in his backpack and stood up. Tomochika followed his lead, heading for the door that seemed like the exit. Now, opening the door revealed a forest.

“We’ve been through a bit too much for this to surprise me anymore...” Tomochika commented.

“Yeah, I guess we’ve seen all sorts of teleportation.” They had grown far too used to suddenly appearing in strange places. Even so, Yogiri grabbed hold of Tomochika’s hand. He didn’t know if it made a difference, but he felt like it would at least keep them from being separated.

Passing through the door, they made it out into the forest. The door disappeared as expected, and there was no sign of any building behind them. They were standing alone on a path cut through the forest, a straight line free of any trees.

“I guess this is the place above the clouds he mentioned?”

I am not confident knowing our position means very much considering all the teleportation we have been subjected to, but I suppose I will take a look around just in case. As usual, Mokomoko floated up into the air, then returned and sank into the ground. After a short wait, she appeared again. *“The Castle in the Sky” is an apt description. We appear to be on a stone disc approximately two kilometers across, beyond which is nothing but clouds. It seems we are in a cavity within those clouds. On top of the stone disc are a few locales, such as forests, lakes, and grasslands, and in the center is a city surrounding a castle.*

“If the circle is only two kilometers across and there are a hundred parties, will we actually run into anyone just by walking around?” Tomochika asked.

There are any number of suitable hiding places available, but it should be no problem finding opponents if you wish to search for them.

"I feel like you didn't say anything there."

Who cares? This situation is ridiculous!

"Did you see anyone else?" Yogiri asked.

No one casually prancing out in the open, no.

As expected, no one would leave themselves so plainly visible.

"In the end, we'll have to fight, so there's no real point in running or hiding. How do we go about finding people?"

"I'm sure they'll all be asking the same question," Tomochika said. "They're all hunting you, right?"

"I guess you're right. Maybe we should just try shouting, then. I don't have a very strong voice, though."

"You want me to do it?" Tomochika sighed. "All right, fine." Taking a deep breath, she then shouted at the top of her lungs. "Yogiri Takatou is right here!!!"

Her voice was so incredibly loud that Yogiri thought his eardrums might burst. He couldn't help but be impressed. He had tried to cover his ears in time, but hadn't quite made it and now had to deal with a bit of ringing for a while.

"Oh, sorry."

"That was...incredible."

After a bit of time, Yogiri finally let go of his ears.

While that serves well for shouting in all directions, sending it in one specific direction makes it something of a weapon on its own! Mokomoko declared with a smug expression.

"Can humans actually project their voice in a specific direction?"

"You mean...like this?" A shiver went down Yogiri's spine as Tomochika's voice came to him from right behind his ear.

"You are impressive in a lot of ways, Dannoura."

Indeed. She excels in many fields, but has spent so much time exclaiming things in shock that we have not been able to see much of it in this adventure!

"You know, I'm starting to get used to all the craziness here, but I don't think another world is a place you would normally expect someone to be able to show off their full abilities."

Such appears to be the next mission of the Dannoura Way. There was no way your ancestors could have predicted the rules that govern an entirely different world.

"I don't think they should have. I really hope this isn't something I have to go

through twice."

That aside, it seems some groups are approaching.

Yogiri looked around but found no one along the path. It seemed the attack would be coming from the trees. However, with his ears still paralyzed, he had no way of predicting where they'd come from. In that case, he knew he would be better off relying on Tomochika's sharper senses to find the enemies before they approached, so he looked over to find her searching the forest blindly like he was.

"You hurt your ears with your own voice?"

Perhaps a little self-control should have been exercised?

"Right?! Sorry, I shouldn't have just yelled out like an idiot like that!"

"It's fine, if they come towards us, it'll still work out." He didn't know whether it made a difference, but Yogiri picked a direction and focused on it. Picking up on the idea, Tomochika turned and looked the opposite way. As they waited, they saw a person slipping through the trees.

"Huh? Is that Hanakawa?" With his unique figure, he was easy to recognize. Behind him were Carol and Ryouko. The moment he recognized them, the three of them vanished.

"Takatou!" Tomochika shouted, looking ahead. A noblewoman with her hair in long curls stood before them. It seemed she had just appeared out of the forest, so she had likely closed within ten meters. In short, it wasn't Hanakawa who had disappeared, but Yogiri and Tomochika who had been moved to another channel. The scenery around them hadn't changed, so it seemed that, like the town, there were plenty of identical areas set up.

"Did you say something about Hanakawa?"

"I saw him for a second, but we can ignore him for now."

"We can, huh?"

"So, how exactly are we going to do this fight?"

Up until now, they had assumed it would be a fight to the death, but according to the rules announced earlier, they could pick another way to resolve the match as well.

"Oho ho ho ho! I propose we settle this with a no-holds-barred death match!" the woman replied with a sharp laugh.

"Wow...what is with this rich girl template?" Tomochika shifted back slightly. It seemed she wasn't interested in associating with the stranger.

"That's just the default, though," Yogiri called back to the woman. "Can't we talk about another way to settle this?"

“Absolutely not!” she answered instantly. It would be impossible to reason with her. “My vengeance shall leave you crushed and shattered! You will come to regret the very day you were born! Prepare yourself!”

Though she claimed to have some sort of grudge against him, she otherwise seemed to be in good spirits.

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“Yogiri Takatou is right here!!!” An incredibly loud voice rang through the forest.

“Was that Tomochika?”

“That sounded like Dannoura...”

Hanakawa and Ryouko made the observation at the same time while their party of three was discussing what to do next.

“I guess searching for people to fight was too much of a pain, so their plan is to call the enemies to them!” Carol said.

“I’m not sure you could call that much of a plan,” Ryouko said. “But at least it makes it easy for us to meet up with them.”

“Is it safe for us to do so?” Hanakawa asked. “They might kill us right away in order to go straight to the next round...”

“But if we wait around, another party will get to them ahead of us,” Carol replied. “I don’t think we have much other choice.”

The call had been quite loud. There was definitely going to be more than one party going to investigate. Though the others had no evidence that the voice they heard was telling the truth, if there was a chance it was, they had no choice but to go there.

“Then I suppose we should go in this direction!”

Hanakawa and the two girls ran off towards the source of the call. Though he had raised the possibility of Yogiri killing them to get to the next round, he was confident that wouldn’t happen without warning. He was optimistic that if he reunited with Yogiri, everything would work out in the end.

Slipping through the trees, they took the shortest possible route. As a Monk, Hanakawa’s physical abilities had greatly improved. Although it was through dense forest, he could move quickly and easily. Ahead of them was a break in the trees where what appeared to be a road cut through the forest. Standing on that road were two figures who appeared to be Yogiri and Tomochika.

But just as Hanakawa had thought that they would make it, the two figures

vanished. The group continued out onto the road, but as expected, their quarries were nowhere to be found.

"What happened?"

"Looks like another party got there first after all," Carol said.

"I see," Hanakawa replied. "So they were moved to another channel."

They looked around the area, but there was no sign of Yogiri anywhere. There were traces on the road that showed someone had been standing there, but no clues as to where they may have gone.

"I suppose we have no choice but to meet up with them in the second round, then," Ryouko said.

"And how are we going to manage that?" Hanakawa asked.

"We could just wait here for someone to show up," Carol answered.

"I see." Hanakawa nodded. "There should be plenty of others coming to investigate the source of the noise, after all."

Listening to the forest around them, they could hear the sound of movement. It seemed quite a few parties were closing in. Suddenly, a shadow jumped out of the trees. For a brief moment, the scenery around them wavered, but it soon turned back to normal. A party had approached within ten meters, so they had been moved to another channel.

The newcomer clicked his tongue. "You guys are my first opponents?"

Hanakawa was a little taken aback. They had been confronted by a group of small children. "This looks...like it will be a bit of a challenge, in a manner of speaking."

At the head of the group was a boy who looked about ten years old. Behind him were two girls who appeared to be about five or six, and another boy who looked even younger. The boy in front seemed to be their leader, and he was glaring at them with open contempt.

"Wow, they're adorable!" Carol exclaimed.

"True...but were they really one of the groups at the pyramid?"

They must have been one of the groups that had stayed away from the discussion at the center, as it would have been very difficult for Hanakawa to forget seeing them—all four of them were beastkin, sporting prominent cat ears.

Chapter 11 — You Don’t Get the Idea of a Young Villainess?! Even When You Act like That?!

“I know this is sudden...”

“But you’re being reincarnated!”

“Excuse me?” Yuriina Tanaka stared back bewildered, floating in an otherwise empty white space. She had no memory of what had brought her there. “What are you talking about? I don’t understand what you mean.”

Even in a situation like this, she wouldn’t lose her composure. That wasn’t the way a high-class individual behaved. Of course, Yuriina Tanaka was no such thing, being the daughter of an ordinary office worker, but that was what she had set her heart on.

“Wanna hear how you died?”

“It’s a pretty boring question if you ask me, though.”

In front of her were two young girls with the same face and attire. The only real way to distinguish between the twins was a faint difference in hair color. They were honestly quite cute.

“If I’m already dead, I suppose there’s no sense in worrying about how.” Yuriina had no awareness of having died, but she couldn’t really remember much of what had happened. Her memories were extremely vague and fuzzy.

She remembered her childhood well enough, but had basically no memories of her time as a high school student. She was reasonably sure she *had* been a high school student, but whether that was still the case or she had eventually graduated, she had no clue.

“Anyway, we were just here picking up any souls we could find drifting around...”

“So if you don’t know how you died, we don’t really know either!”

“I do have plenty of questions,” Yuriina replied. “I suppose I should first ask who you two are?”

“I’m Malna!” the first girl said, spinning around.

“I’m Rilna!” The second did likewise.

“The two of us together are...Malnarilna! Yay!” They clapped their hands together as they finished what must have been a well-practiced routine.

“Umm, knowing your names is great and all, but I still don’t know who you are or what you’re doing here.”

“Don’t look too deep for any meaning in what we’re doing.”

“We’re just doing what looks fun!”

Malna and Rilna were gods. For some reason, Yuriina was sure of that. Gods didn’t really need to explain that they were gods, she supposed. Humans could naturally recognize them for what they were.

Yuriina sighed. “I see. So there’s no point in asking why you’re here. Then let me ask, what will happen to me now?”

“You’re gonna be a young villainess!”

“A wicked woman with no concept of love!”

“I suppose asking why would be pointless,” Yuriina said. “But what do you mean by ‘young villainess’?”

“Huh? You don’t get the idea of a young villainess?! Even when you act like that?!”

“They show up all the time in anime, right?”

“Don’t you read novels or manga?”

No matter how the twins protested, if she was unfamiliar with the term, there wasn’t much she could do about it. So Malnarilna gave her a simple explanation of the idea.

The “young villainess” was a character archetype that often appeared in games aimed at young women, whose role was to persecute the main character throughout the story. At the story’s conclusion, she would be defeated and typically either stripped of her position or executed. There was also a genre that followed people being reincarnated as such characters and attempting to steal the hero from the ostensible main character of the story.

“I see. So does that mean I’m going to be sent to some game world?” Yuriina asked.

“Yeah, that would be great...”

“But unfortunately, there aren’t any worlds like that.”

“How did it become such a major archetype if it doesn’t even exist in the real world?” Yuriina said.

“Yeah, weird, huh?”

“So we set things up a bit for you!”

There were a number of countries in the world ruled by Malnarilna. There

were plenty of young nobles who could fit the bill of villainess, so their plan was to put Yuriina's soul into one of their bodies.

"What'll happen to the body's original soul?" she asked.

"We'll just erase it. Things get annoying when you start mixing souls together."

"Besides, you're the one who decided to play at being a young noblewoman."

This was an act of the gods. There wasn't really any room for Yuriina to complain. Trapped in this empty white space, she didn't have much choice but to do what she was told.

"Okay, I understand. But what do you want me to do when I actually become this young villainess? Judging by your previous explanation, you expect me to do something evil enough that it leads to my own execution?"

"That's where the cheats come in!" one of the twins replied.

"Cheats? You want me to deceive people?"

"No, cheat *powers*," the other supplied. "Superpowers that are so strong, it feels like you're cheating!"

"We're gonna give you some and see how far you can make it!"

Of course, there was nothing Yuriina could do to refuse.

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Her arms twisted behind her back, Yuriina was pushed to the ground. It was very clearly behavior that would not be tolerated towards a young noblewoman, so quite a bit of groundwork had obviously been put in place.

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Everyone around them was quite dressed up, so they must have been at some kind of party, but not a single one of them moved to Yuriina's aid.

"Yuririka La Triole. Judging by your confusion, you seem ignorant of the weight of your own crimes," a young man in particularly extravagant attire announced.

Never mind her crimes, Yuriina didn't know who these people were or where she was. The most she could figure out was that the name the man had called her was a little similar to her own, so that was probably why Malnarilna had picked her for this role.

Yuririka La Triole, huh? I feel little connection to that name.

She mulled the thought over a number of times, but her new identity still didn't click. It seemed Malnarilna was fine leaving her as Yuriina Tanaka.

"I guess you never expected to be apprehended here of all places. But it's too late. We have all the proof we needed of what you did to Iris to get an arrest warrant for you."

Another man in a soldier's uniform beside the first presented a sheet of paper. That must have been the arrest warrant he had mentioned, but Yuriina had no clue what it said. Though she understood the language here, she couldn't read it. Iris must have been the frail girl in the young man's arms. Judging by the conversation so far, it seemed Yuririka had done something to her, but of course Yuriina had no knowledge of it.

"Naturally, this means the marriage is off. Sorry, but this is what happens to a woman driven mad by jealousy."

Well. I don't understand anything that's happening, but I suppose I don't need to think that much about it.

The prattling young man was no more than an obstacle. Political, legal, and ethical considerations were irrelevant to her. All she thought was that the people who dared to restrain and judge her unjustly deserved to be punished.

Yuriina pushed back with her arms, easily throwing off the man holding her down. Her assailant was flung upwards, striking the ceiling before crashing back down to the floor motionless.

"What?!" the young man exclaimed in shock. This must have been far beyond anything Yuririka had been capable of, as he seemed to be struggling to accept what he was seeing.

Yuriina slowly rose to her feet. "I suppose this young lady must be Iris, then?" she said.

"Y-Yes..." the girl squeaked, her voice trembling.

“So, who exactly are you, young man?”

“Wh-What? Grab her! No, never mind. Just kill her! She was caught red-handed!”

“That’s not a polite way to treat a weak young lady like myself, now is it?” Yuriina replied as the soldiers around the young man drew their swords. Others guarding the perimeter of the room also rushed forward.

Steel blades arced towards Yuriina’s head far faster than she could react. She had never fought before. There was no way she could dodge a strike meant to take her life. But that turned out to be no issue, as her body was extraordinarily resilient. One of the so-called “cheat powers” Malnarilna had given her was a sturdy body. A number of soldiers attempted to slash or stab her, but none of them could so much as draw blood. All they managed to accomplish was slicing her dress apart.

I think I’m getting used to this.

With a little bit of time to settle into her newly enhanced abilities, she could start tracking the soldiers’ movements with her eyes fairly easily. Yuriina reached a hand towards an incoming sword, grabbing it out of the air. The blade bent and warped in her grip, so she tossed it aside.

A scream resounded from the background as the discarded weapon apparently struck someone, but she wasn’t overly concerned. She had no intention of purposefully killing someone who wasn’t attacking her, but it was their own fault if they stood around like an idiot while a fight was happening.

The soldier who had lost his weapon dove forward. Yuriina answered with a slap. There was no technique behind it, only a blind swing of an open palm, but when she struck the soldier’s head, he was sent flying backwards, spinning through the air. Plowing through a crowd of people, the soldier struck a wall and punched through it. This was another one of her cheats: incredible physical strength.

Punching, kicking, beating and stabbing the soldiers with their own weapons, Yuriina quickly got a hang of the fight. Nothing they did could hurt her, so she could calmly and methodically take them down one by one.

“You should really be praising these men,” Yuriina commented. “They should have noticed by now they have no chance against me, yet they still do not flee.”

“Who... Who are you? Are you not Yuririka?” the man replied.

“My name is Yuriina Tanaka. I am the daughter of the illustrious Tanaka household. Okay, I suppose our family was not so illustrious. So, what is your

name?”

Frozen in terror, the young man couldn’t respond. Unable to make progress with him, she turned to Iris instead.

“Miss Iris, could you tell me his name?”

“Lord Ernst De Martine...the first prince of the Kingdom of Martine...” Iris managed, still quivering.

“Ah, Lord Ernst, then. I do not know the particulars of this situation, but I am going to have to ask you to die.” Yuriina delivered a swift chop to the man’s forehead. Still lost in his confusion, he made no effort to move as Yuriina’s hand sliced him neatly in two, spraying blood and guts around him and onto Yuriina and Iris.

Iris wailed, dropping to the ground and losing control of her bladder.

“Miss Iris?” Yuriina said, paying no mind to the mess.

“Y-Yes?”

“Might I ask where we are?”

“The main hall of the palace...”

“A palace, is it? Does that mean there is a king somewhere?”

“Y-Yes...though I don’t know exactly where...”

Yuriina couldn’t tell what Iris’s position here was, but she didn’t seem to be royalty. Judging by her appearance, she could have been a commoner.

“I see. Thank you.” Yuriina started walking towards what appeared to be the exit. No one else tried to stop her. Almost everyone in the room had either fled or was huddled on the floor in terror.

“Umm...what do you plan to do with the king?” Iris managed to squeeze out. It seemed she was actually quite a bit braver than she first let on.

“I can’t imagine I can get away with killing the first prince like that, so I figured I’d nip this next problem in the bud. I am supposed to be the young villainess, right?”

“Young villainess? Were you also reincarnated?”

Yuriina stopped. “Oh? Have we met a similar fate here, then?”

“Umm...I don’t think this is what a young villainess character is supposed to do...”

“I was not told anything about what I should do or how I should act. Does that not mean it’s up to my interpretation?”

Yuriina continued on her way.

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From that point on, Yuriina used brute force to accomplish all her desires. She crushed everyone who tried to stand in her way, defeated the king, and took control of the kingdom.

Of course, taking over a kingdom didn't magically grant her any sort of political acumen, so she simply ruled everything according to her whims, giving birth to the despotic Kingdom of Tanaka. Yuriina had nothing to work with. Her memories of her past life were incredibly vague, and she had no idea who Yuririka had been, so she had nothing to constrain her desires. Seeing her people cry out in poverty, suffer from starvation, or die from her casual fun sparked no emotion in her.

She had never really intended to maintain the kingdom in the first place. With no concern for the kingdom's survival, she didn't care much about anything. There was one love she found, though: cats. While she could kill humans without a second thought, she absolutely melted when faced with a cat.

Naturally, the kingdom began to develop in a way that prioritized cats over people. Anyone who hurt a cat was to be executed. Anyone who attempted to block a cat's way was executed. The people could starve, but she spared no expense when it came to keeping every cat living in luxury. The gods who had given Yuriina her powers never appeared again, a sign she interpreted as satisfaction with her performance.

When the day came that her beloved pet Mii passed away, Yuriina's atrocities finally came to an end. Losing the will to live, she holed herself up in her room. There had never been any meaning to ruling the kingdom, so she couldn't care less about what happened to it now.

After a while, the world was reset. Hearing that announcement from the Great Sage, Yuriina was filled with rage. She had assumed her beloved pet cat had died of old age, but in truth it was the fault of a boy named Yogiri Takatou. There was no way she could forgive him. Killing Yogiri would return the world to normal. For Yuriina, there was no other course of action worth considering.

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Deep in the forest, Yogiri stood across from a woman who seemed determined to be his enemy.

Yogiri Takatou vs. Yuriina Tanaka: FIGHT!!!

The words appeared in the air between them. Unable to come to an agreement on terms for their contest, the default rules—a fight to the death—

applied. Though the battles were party against party, only one name, presumably the party leader, was displayed for each. The ringlet-haired noblewoman was named Yuriina Tanaka, meaning she was likely Japanese as well.

"You have to know about my power, so you must have some idea of how you're going to beat me, right?" Yogiri asked. She hadn't attacked immediately, so he wanted to try talking to her. There was always the possibility that she had come here without really knowing what she was doing.

"Of course! Instant death? How can that harm someone like me, who can resist any form of attack?" Yuriina replied, mocking him. It seemed she didn't think much of him. She was a bit shorter than Yogiri but still managed to appear as if she were looking down on him. "If you do not wish to fight, you can simply end your own life. That will bring my sweet Mii back to life! No... No, if I do not rip you apart myself, my anger will never be satisfied!"

"Fine, let's fight, then." Though he said that, Yogiri didn't move. He knew he needed to fight her, but he had no intention of attacking her proactively.

"So, uh, what do I do here?" Tomochika asked.

Indeed...it is but a single opponent, Mokomoko mused*, so Ruler of the Battlefield would certainly be usable, but without the opponent's consent, it will not activate.*

"That seems like a pretty significant drawback. If the opponent doesn't agree, doesn't that just mean my power is useless?"

There is nothing to be done about it. Such is the cost of being able to nullify all powers.

"She really wants to kill me, though," Yogiri said, "so I think you can just watch."

Even if Tomochika wasn't going to be involved in the fight, there was no need for her to leave. It was actually safer for her to be closer to Yogiri so that he could protect her.

Yuriina vanished. A strong gust of wind blew past Yogiri, followed by the sound of something sliding across the ground. Turning to look, he saw her sprawled motionless in the dirt.

Yogiri Takatou Wins!

More words appeared in the air, declaring Yogiri the winner.

"I did it."

"It doesn't feel like you did much of anything, does it?!" Tomochika exclaimed.

Yuriina had likely tried to attack faster than Yogiri's eyes could follow. He

hadn’t noticed the attack, but that didn’t stop his powers from automatically activating to protect him. The moment she had moved, she had died, her momentum carrying her off behind him.

Yuriina’s body vanished.

“Huh? Are we back in that room?” Tomochika asked.

The scenery around them changed. They were no longer in the forest.

“Back in the Antechamber Area, huh?” Yogiri confirmed. It seemed like after each battle, they’d be returned to the Antechamber Area to wait for the next round to begin.

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Chapter 12 — You Should Have Relied on My Glasses Flash

The Sage Shirou was in the castle town, where he had been placed at the start of the tournament.

Things had turned out rather annoying in his opinion. He wasn't the kind of Sage who liked to do much. He was the type who preferred living in peace and quiet, and had only agreed to help with Van's game because it meant getting out of his duty to fight off Aggressors. His job was just to make weapons and armor and keep an eye on the game's balance. It was a trivial amount of work if it meant he could get out of his obligations as a Sage.

In the end, if the Great Sage was going to reset everything anyway, losing didn't mean much, so he considered losing immediately just to get the fight over with, but he doubted the Great Sage would be satisfied with that. He didn't think a fight he was involved in would be very interesting to watch, but he would have to do what he could to liven it up.

"Yo!"

Shirou looked around to find the source of the disembodied voice. There was no one around. The speaker must have been hiding in the shadow of one of the buildings. With a flash of light, Shirou was moved to one of the battle channels. Even if he couldn't see his opponent, they must have come within ten meters of him.

"You really want to fight me without meeting face-to-face?" Shirou called back.

"Nice try! I'm not going anywhere you can see me. I know you'll just turn me into a weapon again!"

"Have we met before?" Shirou asked.

"I am one of Gorbagion's Four Heavenly Kings, Naltine the Weakest!"

Shirou thought for a moment. "Sorry, I can't say I remember you." He honestly couldn't remember encountering anyone with that name.

"Guess I didn't get a chance to introduce myself last time. I'm the guy you turned into some NPC shop sword in front of Yogiri Takatou!"

"If I turned you into a weapon, you shouldn't have been able to go back to

normal.” Shirou’s ability allowed him to turn living things into weapons, but anything he transformed could never be turned back to normal.

“That’s ’cause you didn’t get my main body,” Naltine called back.

“I see. I guess that makes sense.”

“Anyway, let’s do this. This is gonna be a fight to the death!”

“That’s fine with me,” Shirou replied. “Just keep in mind being turned into a weapon counts as dying.”

Sage Shirou VS Demon Lord Gorbagion: FIGHT!!!

An announcement appeared in the air above him. It seemed the leader of the opposing party was someone named Gorbagion. Naltine seemed to be the most motivated of the bunch, but he would have to assume the other Four Heavenly Kings were around somewhere.

Looking around again, he still couldn’t find signs of anyone. It seemed his opponents had guessed that he needed to be able to see a person to turn them into a weapon. There were plenty of buildings around them, creating plenty of blind spots. They could be hiding more or less anywhere.

First, Shirou would need to deal with this environment. Looking around the city, he turned every plant he could find in the flower beds and pots around him into bombs. As simple plants, he couldn’t expect tremendous results from them, but if he had them in large enough numbers, it would be a different story. The chain reaction of explosions was enough to blow away the surrounding buildings.

Smoke and dust filled the air, a visual obstacle that should have been a good chance for his opponents to attack. But still, he saw no movement from them. The clouds of debris settled and visibility returned, showing that the buildings around him had been annihilated and the area around Shirou was now clear.

There were still no signs of the enemy. It seemed they hadn’t been hiding in any of the nearby buildings.

“What a pain...” If they were going to attack him, he wished they’d just hurry up and do it. All this posturing was boring. He wasn’t anxious or unsettled by their behavior, just annoyed. “Van, what happens if your opponent isn’t willing to fight?” Shirou called out.

“Hmm. A passive fight isn’t really that fun to watch. I guess if they won’t fight, they lose.”

“There you have it,” Shirou called out to his invisible opponents.

“What the hell, you trying to bend the rules to win? This is part of our plan! Hey, Admin! If you’re going to say that, then give us a time limit!” Though

Shirou could hear Naltine's voice, he still couldn't pinpoint where it was coming from.

"Okay, fine. If you don't do anything for five minutes, you lose. That goes for you right now, right?"

"Fine!"

Shirou looked around again. There was still no sign of anyone. But just as he thought that, something struck the back of his head. He had been hit by something that had punched through the back of his head and out of his forehead.

Shirou fell forward, landing face first. Something like a needle must have punched through his head, dragging him down to the ground. He hadn't let his guard down. There were no enemies in the immediate area, and he had been watching for attacks coming from a distance.

"Where did that come from?"

"The ground."

"Ah, I see."

Shirou recalled that Naltine had been able to spawn a large number of monsters. Back then, they had come from the huge pillar he was carrying, but apparently, he could do something similar with the ground.

"You won't die from something piddly like that, right?" Naltine said as further impacts came up from the ground, punching through Shirou's nose, mouth, and cheeks. It seemed they were desperate to restrict his vision.

"I have a Philosopher's Stone in my body. To an extent, it makes me mostly immortal." A situation like this wasn't much of a concern for him. Shirou tried to force himself back up off the ground.

"Ah, okay. I'll just rip it out of you, then."

As Shirou pushed both hands into the ground, he tried to force himself back up, but a foot stomped on the back of his neck. A blade of some sort then tore into his back, deciding the fight.

With a clang, the newly created sword fell to the ground.

Shirou casually returned to his feet. The things pinning him down had to have been some sort of barbed needles, so it was just a matter of forcefully tearing them out. By the time he was standing, the wounds had already healed. He picked up the newly fashioned sword.

The result had come about for one simple reason: Shirou could also turn people into weapons by touching them. Even a single instant of contact from an enemy striking him was enough.

“Ah, this time I think you could qualify as a rare item.”

The next moment, a bright light filled the area. It shone from behind him, bright enough to leave him completely blind.

“How foolish you were, Naltine. You should have relied on my Glasses Flash.” This voice came from behind him, but turning around to look would no doubt burn out his eyes, so he couldn’t actually look.

“Are you another one of those Four Heavenly Kings?” Shirou asked.

“Yes. I am Graze the Enlightened.”

“Speaking of which, your leader was Gorbagion, right?”

Naturally, defeating Naltine wouldn’t bring an end to the fight. Shirou casually tossed the Naltine sword behind him. With no idea where the enemy was, there was no chance of him hitting anything.

Even so, a scream filled the air as the blinding light vanished. Turning to look, he saw a man with three pairs of eyes lying on the ground. The top of his head, from his forehead up, had been sliced off, taking his topmost pair of glasses with it. It seemed those glasses had been the source of the blinding light. The Naltine Sword was capable of not only attacking from a distance, but also automatically seeking its target.

Behind Graze were standing a man with stonelike skin, a woman whose long hair obscured her face, and a boy in a T-shirt and jeans.

“Yo, I’m Gorbagion. Nice to meet you,” the young man casually introduced himself. That was probably the entirety of Gorbagion’s party, so Shirou immediately turned them into weapons. That was the end of the fight.

Or it would have been...if anything had happened. But nothing had changed.

“Hey, come on now. I’m a Demon Lord here. There’s no way I’d lose to a status effect like that.”

“Then you should have saved Naltine...” the woman mumbled.

“That was a fight between men,” Gorbagion protested. “I couldn’t intervene, even if he was being careless. Anyway, now it’s my turn.”

“I thought I would be next...but that is fine,” Graze said, standing back up. “I will leave it to you.” Though a good chunk of his head was missing, Shirou wasn’t surprised to find he was still alive. There were plenty of impressively resilient people in this world.

“Going through all of the Four Heavenly Kings one at a time would take forever,” Gorbagion said. “Oh, and by the way, these guys are my familiars, so if you don’t kill me, the fight won’t end.”

“Is that so?” Shirou said, hurling the sword forward and rushing in to follow

it up. As a Sage, his physical abilities far exceeded those of a normal person. He was also a skilled swordsman, so he was quite confident in close-quarters combat.

Making no effort to dodge, Gorbagion grabbed the blade of the Naltine Sword as Shirou grabbed its hilt.

“I get the feeling it would hurt if I let this one hit me. No wonder, since it was made from one of my Four Heavenly Kings.”

Shirou grunted, struggling with all his might, but the sword wouldn’t move. If he let go, he could easily move away, but the Naltine Sword was the only weapon he currently had, so he couldn’t just let it go.

“By the way, if I kill you, will the sword turn back into Naltine?” the Demon Lord asked.

“No. Even if I die, it’ll stay the way it is.”

“Ah. Too bad.” Gorbagion clenched his fist, shattering the Naltine Sword. “I guess we have an opening in the Four Heavenly Kings now. Interested?”

“Are you insane?!” Shirou had clearly lost, so the last thing he expected was an invitation.

“No, I’m quite serious. Actually, you don’t have a choice. My power forces you to join me.”

The next instant, Shirou realized he was, in fact, now one of Gorbagion’s Four Heavenly Kings.

Demon Lord Gorbagion Wins!

The announcement appeared in the air above them shortly before they were all teleported to another room.

“Where are we?”

“It’s the Antechamber Area,” Shirou replied respectfully. “We wait here until the next round starts.”

With no more enemies to fight, the system had decided that Gorbagion was the winner.

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Celestina had appeared in the forest. She instantly sent her threads out scouting, finding numerous other parties. She didn’t spend that much time thinking about which party she should fight, simply walking towards the closest one. Emerging from the forest, she found herself standing atop a cliff, at what was presumably the edge of the floating island.

There was a party of four ahead of her—three men and one woman, all of whom looked rather rough. At first glance she thought all four of them were men, but one was a woman in men's clothing. Judging by her posture and more refined manner, she seemed to be the leader. They all wore swords, but the woman's sword was clearly different from the rest, a clue as to her true identity.

As Celestina approached, the space around them flickered. Reaching the ten-meter distance, they had been moved to a separate channel to fight. Seeing the channel change, the woman turned to look at Celestina.

"Good day," Celestina greeted them. "Shall we fight?"

"Oh? From your appearance, I thought you'd want to add some rules, but you're actually pretty direct."

"My goal is only to kill Yogiri Takatou, after all," the concierge explained.

"Oh? In that case, I think we have some room to negotiate."

"Not at all," Celestina said. "The only thing that matters is killing Yogiri Takatou. I am taking the course of action with the highest probability of accomplishing that. There is no reason to allow an opponent who would lose to me to move forward, and if you can defeat me, the chances of defeating Yogiri improve if I let you proceed in my stead."

"You've got some guts, huh? I really like straightforward people like you."

"I appreciate the compliment," Celestina replied.

"Let's talk a bit. My name is Degul."

"My name is Celestina. I am currently employed as the concierge of a certain hotel."

"I see. You do give off that impression," Degul said. "Out of curiosity, have we met somewhere before?"

"I am quite certain we have not. I am quite confident in my ability to remember faces."

"Guess I must be imagining things, then," Degul shrugged.

"No, I believe there is a reason you think we have met before."

"Oh? Please, do tell. It's really starting to bother me."

"You must be royalty, yes?" Celestina said, pointing to Degul's sword. "The weapon you hold is the Holy Sword Orz, passed down in the Manii royal family."

"Oh, so this thing is pretty impressive?"

"You are unaware of it?" It didn't seem like Degul was simply feigning ignorance. She must not have known about the sword.

"I just picked it up recently," Degul explained, "though I had an idea it was

linked to the royal family somehow."

"I see. Normally that would be unthinkable, but within this chaos, I suppose it isn't impossible for you to have come across it."

"So? Now that you know I just found it lying around, do you still think I'm royalty?" Degul asked.

"I suppose the only thing that is left is your appearance, as your facial features closely resemble those of the royal family."

"Is that it? I've never really looked at my face that hard before. Couldn't I say the same about you, though?"

"Yes," Celestina replied. "I am related to the royal family as well, though only through a branch family."

"Ahh. So there are branch families scattered about, huh?"

"I would not say 'scattered about,' no," Celestina corrected her. "My sister and I are very much an anomaly. There was no attempt to stop my parents' elopement, nor any effort to track us down afterwards."

"My luck must be crazy for me to meet two members of the royal family in one day," Degul said.

"These are quite unique circumstances," Celestina replied. "I cannot imagine it being that difficult to believe multiple members of the royal family would gather to attempt to save the world, given their special abilities."

"I'm not here to save the world or anything...but all right, my curiosity has been satisfied. Let's do this."

Degul vs. Celestina: FIGHT!!!

Degul's words seemed to constitute an agreement with the rules, so the fight immediately began. And as quickly as it started, it was over.

Celestina Wins!

Degul and her party were scattered in pieces across the ground, thoroughly dismembered. Celestina hadn't given them a single moment to react. Even before the fight had begun, she had wrapped her invisible threads around their bodies. That first and deciding action had prompted the channel shift. The next moment, Celestina found herself in another room.

"I imagine she felt secure in her royal ability to suppress the Gifts of others, but I am afraid my skills with the thread are no more than plain swordsmanship."

Degul hadn't even noticed the thread wrapped around her, so she had no way of defending herself from it. In other words, she hadn't been all that strong. Against another opponent, her ability to nullify powers may have brought her victory, but being so weak herself, Celestina wasn't interested in letting her pass.

She was glad to have gotten Degul out of the running as early as she did.

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Chapter 13 — Why Don’t We Let It Swallow Hanakawa So He Can Attack It from the Inside?

One day, his sister Mireiyu didn’t come home. Ever since, Daniel and his family had lived in poverty. Their father had abandoned them, and their mother was too sick to leave her bed. With their older sister gone, the rest of the kids were hopeless. Mireiyu had died, but there was no way for them to learn of that fact. All they knew was that no matter how much time passed, she never returned.

Daniel lived with his two younger sisters, his younger brother, and his mother. Being the oldest of the siblings, it fell on Daniel to find food somehow for the five of them. So he turned to stealing. As a young child he was in no position to take a proper job, and he couldn’t think of anything else. Using his agility as a cat beastkin, he stole only the bare minimum he needed from stores that sold food. He could just barely manage to procure enough to keep the five of them alive.

However, after a time, his mother passed away. Her illness needed regular doses of expensive medicine. Daniel couldn’t scrounge up the money needed to pay for it, nor would he know how to find it if he could.

Their family became four. The burden on Daniel had become lighter, and life had become easier. However, the stress he was experiencing only grew, until one day he reached his limit. He finally slipped up, got caught stealing, and was beaten to death. He never knew what happened to his younger siblings after that.

The next thing he knew, he had returned to life with his mother. All of their suffering had been a dream. Their mother was well, and while their father was nowhere to be found, he and his three younger siblings were able to live in reasonable comfort. It felt like something was a little off, but Daniel convinced himself that things were fine.

A worldwide disaster then drew Daniel and his family into Cavern Quest. Though the situation was confusing and chaotic, it turned out Daniel had some aptitude for adventuring, and he quickly adapted to their new situation.

After a short time, a message came from the Great Sage telling him of the older sister he had once had and reminding him of his mother's death. Everything all came back to a boy named Yogiri Takatou.

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"You seem to be raring to go, but please, wait!" Hanakawa pleaded with the small cat children. "Even if we are to do combat, surely there is no need for it to be a fight to the death! Look, you even have small children with you!"

"What? Who cares? Moron," the oldest of the children spat.

Daniel vs. Ryouko Ninomiya: FIGHT!!!

It seemed his response counted as a failure to negotiate the rules, forcing them into the default death match.

"I suppose the oldest of them is Daniel, but why are we named after Ryouko?!"

"It's probably just the party leader's name that shows up," Carol answered.

"Am I not the party leader?!"

"Is that a serious question?" Carol replied.

He had only been half serious, but seeing Carol take it as an actual question, Hanakawa couldn't keep up the facade and shut his mouth.

"Don't let your guard down just because they're children," Ryouko warned them. This was a fight to the death. They couldn't afford to underestimate their opponents because of their age or any apparent weaknesses.

"But what is there for us to do?" Hanakawa asked. "Against some crusty old man I have no qualms, but to fight children?"

As Hanakawa hesitated, Carol hurled a kunai, striking the youngest of the children.

"Carol?!"

"We're not supposed to underestimate them based on their appearance. If they were to transform or something, there'd be nothing we could do."

"Possibly, but even so, your ruthlessness shocks me!"

Carol continued throwing kunai, but this time Daniel was able to deflect them. He suddenly grew larger, stepping forward to cover the others.

Aside from the ears, he first appeared to be effectively human, but the transformation caused fur to grow all over his body. That must have been what

made him look larger. He had drawn closer to the bestial side of his nature. Growing further, he hunched over. It seemed he wasn't done transforming quite yet.

"A transformation?! Then let us attack while we have the chance!" Hanakawa fired a ball of energy, a feint with little to no charging time. The ball raced towards Daniel's face—he had almost entirely finished transforming into a cat, and before the ball could strike, Daniel bit the attack out of the air. "Wha?! How did he do that?!"

In time with Hanakawa's attack, Ryouko dashed forward. Drawing her sword, she delivered a slash to the side of Daniel's neck. Distracted by Hanakawa's energy blast, he was unable to respond to Ryouko's slash. That had been the intention, but a cat's jaws still caught her blade in the air. Ryouko jumped backwards, the upper half of her sword now missing. A second cat head had grown from Daniel's neck, intercepting her attack.

"Hmm...a Catberus, perhaps?" Hanakawa pondered aloud. Apparently the four beastkin had fused together, transforming into an enormous cat with four heads. Two new heads were positioned on either side of its first one, while a fourth protruded from its chest.

"If that's supposed to be a play on Cerberus, shouldn't it only have three heads?"

"Ha ha, it seems you are unaware, Carol," Hanakawa chided her. "There are even some legends where Cerberus has as many as fifty heads!"

"This isn't the time for joking around," Ryouko scolded the two of them. "We're in a pretty bad spot." She showed them her broken sword. "It looks like he ate it. That wouldn't be possible without some special ability."

"Are beastkin able to transform like this?" Carol asked.

"While I take great pride in my plentiful experience in this world, I cannot say I have ever heard of beastkin transforming."

Beastkin in this world, while possessing some animal traits, were more or less the same as humans. They might have animal ears or tails, and slightly stronger physiques, but there wasn't much else different. They didn't have huge amounts of fur, nor could they turn into animals or grow to enormous sizes like this.

"My Discernment skill tells me nothing, so it appears his power does not derive from the Gift," Hanakawa observed. "Perhaps it was one granted to them by the Great Sage?"

"Things should be easier for you now that he looks like that, right?" Carol

asked.

“Indeed. He appears to be no more than a monster now. It seems his ability is to devour and erase anything...so how about this?”

Hanakawa focused for a short time before unleashing a barrage of energy blasts into the air. If Daniel’s ability allowed him to eat anything to neutralize it, Hanakawa would aim somewhere aside from the head.

“Yaaaah!” With Hanakawa’s shout, the energy balls dove down at the cat beast. Though individually weak, the rain of projectiles was unavoidable. Even if the barrage couldn’t inflict lethal damage, it would at the very least determine where they could effectively strike. However, Hanakawa’s attack didn’t injure Daniel at all. Additional heads sprouted from his back, devouring each and every one of the energy blasts.

“Aha, so it was not limited to four heads at all... Huh? Wait, what are we supposed to do, then?”

Daniel charged at them. Hanakawa’s group dove out of the way, sending Daniel flying off into the trees. A portion of forest vanished, as if it had been cleanly erased.

“I see. He appears to be limited to melee range, but his attack power seems next to unstoppable.”

“Why don’t we let it swallow Hanakawa so he can attack it from the inside?” Carol suggested. “It’s pretty common for seemingly invincible enemies to have hidden weak spots inside them, right?”

“Except I will be erased the moment I am eaten! Although, on another note, if that is a power granted by the Great Sage, should your nullification ability not be able to do something about it?”

“My power only works defensively, I’m afraid!” she replied. “Anything that touches me will be nullified...so I wonder what happens if it bites me? Even if it nullifies his power, it’ll probably still tear me apart with its teeth, right?”

“That sounds entirely useless!” Hanakawa cried. “Ryouko, do you not have some incredible samurai power you can use here?!”

“My powers are all focused on using my sword. If it can just eat my blade, I won’t be able to do much.”

“What about you, Hanakawa?” Carol asked. “You got some kind of new power, didn’t you?”

“Now that you mention it, I have yet to figure out what it is...and this hardly seems like the time to check!”

Daniel charged again. The group dodged backwards once more, taking some

distance. Perhaps he wasn't used to his large new body yet, as his attacks were still quite sloppy, but it would only be a matter of time before he got accustomed to it. The longer the battle progressed, the more difficult things would be for them.

"Perhaps this is actually the best time for me to check. Let us see..."

Ability Name: Friendship Counter

People you have formed strong bonds with will appear to save you when you're in trouble. It's a bit like a judgment of your past actions!

"I-I see? In that case... Sir Takatou! Please help me!"

If he had to think of someone he had a strong connection with who might help him, Yogiri was the first one that would come to mind. He couldn't think of anyone else.

Daniel charged again, this time changing direction at the last second. Hanakawa just barely managed to dodge out of the way. Daniel was clearly starting to get a handle on his new body. It wouldn't be long before he caught one of them.

"Why isn't he coming?!"

"Did you really have much of a bond with him?" Carol asked, reading the paper the Great Sage had given Hanakawa over his shoulder.

"The frankness of your question wounds me!"

"Honestly, I can't think of anyone that would show up to help you when you're in trouble."

"I would appreciate it if you spent less time insulting me and more time figuring out how we are going to win!"

Carol threw another kunai, which was once again intercepted by one of Daniel's many heads. "Then how about this?" She then threw a small ball at the cat beast—an explosive, judging by the fuse attached to it. It was a kind of bomb that had apparently been used by ninja during Japan's Warring States era. The bomb struck the ground near Daniel's feet and detonated.

It went without saying that an explosion couldn't be eaten. Or so Hanakawa would have thought, but his naivety was quickly put to rest as the shrapnel, smoke, and even the shock wave from the blast were all sucked into a single point. A new cat head had emerged from one of Daniel's legs to absorb the attack.

"It seems ranged attacks aren't helping much either."

“It doesn’t seem like even the three of us together—” Hanakawa started, but was cut off by a sharp pain in his left arm. A kunai had stabbed him. “What happened?”

“The cat spat that out,” Carol answered.

“That means...”

Carol and Ryouko leaped to the side, leaving a confused Hanakawa standing alone. A broken sword blade punched through his leg, followed by a rain of energy balls, and finally a cloud of dust and shrapnel. Completely taken off guard, he was sent flying.

“Looks like it can spit back anything it eats,” Carol commented. “That’s kind of annoying!”

“If I can make an excuse: I figured you’d be okay since you have Auto Heal,” Ryouko added.

“That is all well and good, but could you please help me before the huge cat thing attacks again?!”

Seeing that Daniel was targeting Hanakawa, the two girls jumped away again. The cat charged, but Hanakawa was immobilized. Whether he intended to wait for his Auto Heal or relied on his active healing powers, it took time for them to restore Hanakawa to fighting shape. Any attempt to recover would get him eaten instantly. In short, there was nothing he could do.

“That’s it, I’m becoming a ghost! I will haunt you twenty-four seven, Carol! You won’t have a minute of privacy!” Hanakawa accepted his fate. Closing his eyes, he waited for the end to come...but instead, he felt himself lifted up into the air. Someone had grabbed his collar and pulled him away.

Opening his eyes, he saw that Daniel was considerably far away. At the same time, his wounds had virtually all healed.

“What the heck? Having a close bond with you is way too much of a pain,” his rescuer sighed.

Looking up, he saw a familiar face. “Sir Lute!”

His savior had been Lute, spawn of the Dark God Albagarma.

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Chapter 14 — So If We Hurt Hanakawa until Just Before He Dies, Friendship Counter Will Activate!

“Huh? If you are here now, that means you must have embraced your role of saving me at the last moment, with a line like ‘No, I’m the only one who gets to kill him!’”

“Please, let me go home...” Lute moaned.

He was the spawn of a Dark God. Having met Hanakawa in the Garula Canyon, he had dragged him across the world in an effort to kill Yogiri. In the end, he had been killed by Albagarma’s sister in the Underworld. The Dark God Albagarma didn’t exist anymore now that the world had been reset, but as Lute hadn’t been killed by Yogiri, he was still around.

“If I deal with that thing, can I go?”

“Huh? Do you not wish to do something about Yogiri Takatou?”

“If Lady Mana couldn’t beat him, what do you expect me to do?”

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Hanakawa had hoped Lute would become a useful ally for them, but it seemed Lute had already completely given up on his revenge.

"Very well! If you help me out of this situation, then I will be satisfied! But he is capable of devouring any attack and spitting it back at you! Is there anything you can do about him?"

"I see. I wonder if he can deal with this then?" Lute knelt down, putting a hand to the ground. The earth began to shake, and Daniel vanished as a rent in the ground opened beneath him. The earth had split apart, starting at Lute's hand and reaching past the cat beast.

"What did you do?"

"It's something like a pitfall trap. Being able to eat attacks doesn't mean anything if you send him somewhere else. Okay, see ya." Apparently having finished his part, Lute vanished.

"Wait, wait, wait! We have not won the battle yet!"

Victory required one of the sides to be killed, but there was no telling whether Daniel had actually died or not. Hanakawa ran over to where Daniel had disappeared. Looking down the newly formed crevice, he couldn't see to the bottom. Naturally, Daniel was nowhere in sight either.

"We're in the sky here, right?" Carol asked, coming up beside Hanakawa. "Maybe he fell all the way down to the surface."

"In that case, will this decide the fight? There are no rules about leaving the arena, are there?"

"I guess getting out of danger didn't help us much then."

"Do not complain to me about it! Sir Lute is the one who suddenly appeared and did that without asking!"

"But if he fell and can't return, that should effectively be a victory for us, shouldn't it?" Ryouko asked. "Maybe we should ask?"

The Great Sage should have been watching their fights. Everything seemed to hinge on whether he found the fights interesting or not, so an ambiguous conclusion like this should have been against his wishes. If they called out to him, there was a good chance they'd get a response.

"Very true," Hanakawa replied. "I suppose we should at least try—"

Looking up to shout at the sky, Hanakawa was stopped by something flying out of the crevice at a tremendous speed. Naturally, it was Daniel, the many-headed cat.

"Well, the crevice was not particularly wide, so it is not entirely unthinkable he could run up the side. Uh, Sir Lute?" Hanakawa tried calling for him, but

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Lute didn't reappear. It was hard for him to tell what counted as him being in danger. Maybe no one would appear unless he was clearly about to die.

"So if we hurt Hanakawa until just before he dies, Friendship Counter will activate!" Carol declared.

"Please do not say that as if you have just struck upon a golden idea!"

"Stop joking around," Ryouko interrupted. "It looks like he's getting stronger."

Perhaps out of rage, Daniel's hair was now standing on end, countless heads sprouting from around his body and now glaring at the trio.

"Looks like it's about time," Carol murmured. A few moments later, Daniel exploded.

"What on earth just happened?!" Hanakawa exclaimed.

"That's my nullification power!"

"I thought you said you had to make physical contact for it to work?"

"I can make an item that seals their power too! It takes a while for it to take effect, so it's really annoying to use!" Carol explained, sounding strangely proud.

Where the enormous cat beast once stood, there were now four children collapsed on the ground. Just nullifying their abilities shouldn't have injured them at all, but perhaps from the backlash of their transformation, they were lying motionless for now.

"But when did you place such an item on them?" Hanakawa asked.

"Remember that first kunai I threw? It was before they combined, so they weren't able to eat it. Since they fused after that, the kunai got mixed in with them!"

"So...it only worked by sheer coincidence then?" Hanakawa said.

"Anyway, what do we do now?" Ryouko said. "Killing them would be like taking candy from a baby."

"I am not sure about killing a defenseless opponent..." Hanakawa answered, pulling some rope out of his item box. Tying the four children up, he gave the other end of the rope to Carol, whose nullification ability could pass through it to restrain them.

"I suppose I'm the leader, so I'll try talking to them," Ryouko said. "If we let Hanakawa do it, he'll just agitate them further."

Depending on how the conversation went, the situation could get much, much worse, so Hanakawa left the negotiations to Ryouko.

Daniel looked up at her as she approached. It seemed he was able to talk.

“Admit that you lost or we’ll kill you all right here,” Ryouko declared.

“How direct can you be?!” Hanakawa exclaimed.

“Do we have any other choice?” she replied.

“Well...I suppose there are not really any grounds for negotiation here...”

Without determining a winner, they could never leave this channel, and once they had reached a conclusion, they’d be cut off from each other and so unable to interact at all. This was the only way out for them.

“Fine... I admit it, we lost,” Daniel muttered.

Ryouko Ninomiya Wins!

Words declaring their victory appeared in the sky.

“You beat us, so you definitely have to kill Yogiri Takatou. Then Mireiyu will—”

Before he could finish what he was saying, Daniel and his siblings vanished. Hanakawa and the two girls were now in a room, so it seemed they had been moved somewhere else.

“I see. After being victorious, you are moved to a waiting room, I suppose.”

“So it seems,” Carol replied.

It looked like they’d be able to take a short break.

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A man in a futuristic battle suit faced off against a woman with a wide-brimmed hat and a black cloak.

The man’s name was Saiz. The witch he was fighting against was Evon, but in truth it didn’t seem like much of a fight. From the first moment of their encounter, Saiz had totally overwhelmed her. As strong as Evon was, she just didn’t compare to the futuristic soldier. And yet the fight didn’t seem anywhere close to finishing.

Saiz’s gun fired a beam of light, punching through Evon’s head. The witch collapsed motionless to the ground, and for a moment it looked like the fight was decided, but before long, another Evon had appeared beside the first. The pattern had repeated countless times, though the previous bodies had vanished over the course of the fight.

“Light property, ranged, piercing, headshot. That sounds right, doesn’t it?” Evon analyzed the attack calmly.

“What? ‘Light property’? What is this, a fantasy RPG?” Though he knew magic existed in this world, Saiz didn’t know anything about how it functioned.

He was powerful enough that he could fully ignore the whole system.

"I can make any number of clones, but repeating the same thing over and over is boring. So instead, I'm going to make myself resistant to your attacks."

Saiz fired another shot, striking Evon's forehead dead-on...and deflecting off it. Though the attack left a small burn on her face, it was clear she had become more resistant to it than before.

"My primary ability is Reproduction. I can produce improved copies of any number of things, including myself. So no matter how long this goes on, you'll never beat me. How about it? Would you like to give up?"

"Hm? In that case, *you* give up," Saiz replied. "Your attacks aren't even scratching me." A barrier had been deployed around him. It blocked everything from reaching him, whether they were physical attacks or what this world called magic.

"That's only a matter of time. I said I can improve myself, right?"

Evon launched a fireball from her hand. Though the fire scattered harmlessly before reaching him, it had clearly been much stronger than the previous attack. Saiz's battle log recorded everything as numbers, so he could clearly see that her power was gradually increasing.

"How about this then?" Changing his gun to ballistic mode, he fired a shot at her chest. The bullet tore through her heart, completely destroying it, and out of her back. For anyone else, it would have been instant death. Saiz's battle AI even determined that she was, in fact, dead. But beside the bloody mess of Evon's falling corpse, a new Evon appeared. Checking the battle log, it seemed she had just appeared out of thin air.

"The bullet punched through your clothes, but that cloak wasn't even scratched."

There was no way the bullet could have missed the cloak after passing through her, yet it had seemed to slip through the fabric, leaving no trace of its passage. The battle log showed that the bullet had struck the cloak, but had passed right through it. In short, it seemed like it didn't actually have a physical form.

"Exactly," Evon replied. "This is the Cloak of the Starry Sky. It's the source of my power." Though at first glance it looked like no more than a black cloak, upon closer inspection, Saiz could see small pinpricks of light dotting the fabric.

"So if I take that from you, you'll die?" he asked.

"I wouldn't count on it. No one but me can touch it." For her to so clearly share the source of her immortality, he knew she must have had some plan to

protect it. “The cloak connects me to my home world. The resources used to make my replicas all come from there. Basically, you’re up against an entire world.”

“Ha ha, seriously? In that case, can I ask you something?”

“What is it?” Evon replied.

“If you’re so strong, what are you doing in this world?”

“I’m on vacation. Back home, I’m revered as the Witch of Starry Salvation. To be brief, I defeated the Demon Lord threatening my world.”

“Well, congratulations.”

“But how do you think that world treated me after there was no Demon Lord to defeat?”

“They probably think you’re a nuisance, don’t they?”

“Exactly. A world that has achieved perfect peace has no need for warriors. I ended up being a sleeping threat, one that could come for them at any time.”

“So, which was it?” Had she run away, or had she been exiled? Saiz had to assume it was one of the two.

“I left of my own accord. As a parting gift, I took the whole world with me. It would have been destroyed if it hadn’t been for me, after all. I think it’s fair to say that it belongs to me.”

“Why wouldn’t you just kill the people who hated you and stay there?” Saiz asked.

“I didn’t have any personal grudge against them, and fighting them all one by one would be too much of a chore. Taking them to use as a power source solved both of those problems for me.”

“I can’t imagine the people of that world were all too happy about your choice...but I guess it’s their own fault for forcing all their problems on one person.”

“I came to this world so I could relax,” Evon finished her explanation.

“I see. I just happened to come to this world by chance,” Saiz said offhandedly.

“In that case, it’s fine if you lose, right? I’ll go kill Yogiri Takatou for you.”

“Actually, I have some business with the Great Sage,” Saiz replied. “My goal is a bit different from yours.”

“Oh, really? But my world has a population of 8,748,237,756 people. All of them serve as fuel for my reproductions.”

No doubt Evon had made that declaration in an attempt to inspire despair in him, but instead it had the opposite effect.

“That’s good to hear. I feel like I can handle that many.” Saiz lifted his gun up into the air. “Come!” There was no point in shouting like that or making such a dramatic display, but he couldn’t help getting into the spirit of things.

The world around them darkened as an enormous object appeared in the air, blocking out the sun.

“Wha...” Evon was speechless.

Saiz doubted anything like this existed in her world. It was an army of star forts. He had summoned countless star forts to the sky above them. One such fort fired a beam of light down at him, and in the next moment he was transported to its bridge.

“I feel bad for doing this to a world I’ve never visited and eight billion people I’ve never met, but...” Saiz ordered the armada to fire. The countless spherical star forts opened their firing ports, pointing cannons in all directions.

And then the world was consumed by fire. The Castle in the Sky, the island beneath it, the ocean, the atmosphere, everything in that world was consumed in the blaze, with even the ashes that lingered being caught up and incinerated once again. Though only within that channel, everything in the world aside from the star forts had been annihilated.

Saiz’s battle AI confirmed that Evon had been erased. No matter what kind of defenses she may have had, if he brought enough firepower to bear to kill eight billion people at once, there was nothing she could do.

Saiz Wins!

Words floated up in the empty air. The next moment, Saiz found himself in a waiting room. He had been brought to the Antechamber Area to wait for the second round.

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Chapter 15 — How Did Things Move So Smoothly towards My Own Suicide?

After defeating Yuriina Tanaka, Tomochika and Yogiri found themselves back in the Antechamber Area. It seemed they would be waiting there until the next round started. The second round would only take thirty-two parties, so it felt like it was going to be a while before round one finished.

“I think I saw Hanakawa back there,” Yogiri said, sitting down on the couch across from Tomochika.

“He was behind me, right? I didn’t see him.” The two of them had been standing back-to-back, waiting for enemies to approach. Yuriina had come from Tomochika’s side, so she had no idea what Yogiri had seen.

“What do you think he wanted? I doubt he was planning on killing us.”

“He should have figured out by now that he can’t beat you...right?” Considering Hanakawa’s behavior up until now, it was hard to say with certainty that a new power or new ally wouldn’t go to his head. “So what do we do about him?” she asked.

“That depends.”

“Of course.”

If he just wanted to talk with them, that was fine. If he was plotting something, though, there was a chance they’d have to kill him. Tomochika had already come to terms with that.

Putting on some tea and enjoying the snacks provided for them, the pair waited for a while until an announcement appeared in the air above them.

Last Boss Quest, Final Stage, Round Two: Start!

“Okay, let’s go.”

Yogiri slowly made his way to the door, Tomochika close behind him. Stepping outside, they found themselves somewhere dark. Candles here and there provided faint illumination of the countless human skeletons littering the floor. They seemed to be in a crypt of some sort.

“What now?” Tomochika asked. “Should we shout again?”

“It looks like we’re underground, right? Shouting won’t do us much good if we’re the only ones here.”

“Then can we go somewhere else? This place gives me the creeps.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We should probably move.” If they wanted to get to the next round, they needed to find another enemy to battle. There was no telling if an enemy would ever find them if they stayed in a place like this. Yogiri picked up a candle embedded in a skull.

“Wow, no hesitation, huh?” Tomochika commented. Though she wasn’t bothered about any sort of taboo involving touching dead bodies, she couldn’t deny that the idea was unpleasant.

“These are objects placed here for the game. I doubt they’re real.”

“I guess we can’t take just the candle, so we don’t really have a choice anyway.”

The pair started walking, Yogiri in the lead. The faint light of their candle revealed a wall made of human bones.

“What’s with this place?” Tomochika exclaimed. “Someone has horrible taste!”

“I guess they were trying to build up the atmosphere. This is probably what a catacomb would feel like.”

The catacombs in Paris are said to be two kilometers long, Mokomoko added.

Tomochika groaned. For now there was nothing to do but keep moving forward, but it seemed like they still had a long way to go. There were no branches in the path, so it wasn’t really possible for them to get lost, but the poor lighting made it hard to see where they were going.

Just as they were about to start worrying about whether there was actually an exit or not, a staircase came into view. Climbing the stairs, they ascended into a windowed room lit from the outside, meaning they had likely reached the surface. Opening a door and stepping outside, they found themselves in a park. The park was fairly small and surrounded by what appeared to be houses.

“It feels like a park in a residential area. No sign of anyone living here, though,” Tomochika said after looking around. Of course, being a field in Cavern Quest, she wouldn’t have expected the city to be populated.

“Mokomoko, can you take a look for us?” Yogiri asked.

Very well! Mokomoko flew up into the sky and began spinning to observe their surroundings.

“I know she’s my ancestor, but she really comes off as an idiot, doesn’t she?” Tomochika commented.

“I never really paid attention to how she was doing it before,” Yogiri said.

After spinning for a while, the ghost returned to the ground.

There is one other person in the city, north of us. I do not know who they are, but it seems they have yet to spot us.

"It doesn't really matter if they have or not," Yogiri said. "It's not like we're going to surprise attack them."

"I guess I should yell then," Tomochika said, prompting Yogiri to step back and cover his ears. "Yogiri Takatou is right here!!!"

This time Yogiri had been ready for it, so it hadn't hurt him as much. She had shouted as loud as she could, so there was no doubt that everyone around would notice them.

After a short time, a girl appeared from the huddled buildings.

"Akino?!"

The new arrival was their classmate, Sora Akino.

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Last Boss Quest, Final Stage, Round Two: Start!

As they waited in their room, an announcement appeared in the air above Hanakawa's group. Stepping out the door, they found themselves on the bank of a lake. In the distance was what appeared to be a castle, but it was hard to tell where they were in relation to the forest from earlier.

Hanakawa took a ready stance. "I guess the participants were all sent to random locations once again," he said.

"Surely Takatou made it to the second round, right?" Ryouko said. Yogiri had clearly been facing off with someone, so he should have killed them more or less immediately.

"I see. But what are we to do? If they are intending to keep to the same plan, we should hear a certain someone's voice..."

But before Tomochika's yell could reach them, something fell from the sky. The ground shook, sending shock waves past them. Hanakawa somehow managed to keep his footing thanks to his enhanced physical abilities. He couldn't let himself be sent flying by such a small impact.

"I-It's them!"

"Yo!"

A boy in a T-shirt and jeans greeted them. He was the one leading a party of nonhumans at the top of the pyramid. Apparently he had landed within ten meters of them, as they had already shifted channels and been locked into a

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fight.

“W-Wait! Please hold on! We do not have to fight immediately, do we? Let us take some time to discuss the rules!”

“Sure,” the boy replied, making no show of attacking.

“I suppose we should begin with introductions! I am Daimon Hanakawa! These two are Ryouko Ninomiya and Carol!”

“If your plan was to buy time for us, why did you introduce us all yourself?” Ryouko sighed as she gave Hanakawa a disappointed look.

“Ah! It seems I panicked a bit!”

“I’m Gorbagion. I’m a Demon Lord at the moment. These guys are my Four Heavenly Kings.” One by one, Gorbagion introduced his minions: a huge man with skin like stone, Breia the Solid; a slender man with three eyes, Graze the Enlightened; a woman with long hair, spilling over her face and reaching the ground, Haruka the Hollow Claw; and a young man in a lab coat, wearing glasses, Shirou the Weakest.

“Aha. How very conventional for you to have Four Heavenly Kings as a Demon Lord... But wait, is the construction of your party not a bit different from when we last saw you?”

“Good eye. Yeah, we swapped someone out.” There should have been a boy with horns accompanying them. The other members Hanakawa remembered were all present, so Shirou must have taken his place. “What will we do about the rules?” Gorbagion asked. “If you don’t have any ideas, I’m fine with a death match.”

Hanakawa stared intently at the Demon Lord’s army. Despite his Discernment skill, he couldn’t learn much about them. It seemed they weren’t using the Battlesong system. The only one who returned any results was Shirou. His class was Sage, and his level was over one hundred million.

“Huh? Why is a Sage here?” It seemed odd for a Sage to be in the Demon Lord’s army. Shirou alone would have no problems wiping the floor with Hanakawa’s whole party.

“I recruited him,” Gorbagion replied.

“Recruiting a Sage is that easy?!” Hanakawa exclaimed.

“So, what’re we doing?”

“Uhh...how about...rock paper scissors?” Hanakawa tried, desperate for anything.

“Fine by me.”

“Of course, such a resolution would be too simple... Wait, that is okay?!”

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“If we fought normally, it would hardly be a fight at all. I could tell that from the start.”

“So you are okay with leaving it all to chance?!” Hanakawa cried.

“You’re the one that suggested it,” Gorbagion said.

“Yes, I am aware! Then let us settle it with rock paper scissors!”

“Okay then, we’ll go one-on-one, winner goes on, loser dies.”

“Why do they have to die?! I had just found relief in finding a contest which would not cost us our lives!”

“Yeah, but then there’d be no tension,” Gorbagion replied. “If you disagree, we’ll just have a normal fight.”

“Okay,” Ryouko stepped in, recognizing Hanakawa was only going to cause more problems for them. “Those rules are fine.”

“Ryouko!” Hanakawa protested. “Death Rock Paper Scissors is going too far!”

“You realize if we don’t, we’re just going to die anyway, right?”

“Grr...I suppose...this improves our chances slightly...”

Ryouko Ninomiya vs. Demon Lord Gorbagion: FIGHT!!!

The announcement played in the air above them now that the rules had been decided.

“I’ll go first,” Gorbagion said, stepping forward.

“Then our first will be Daimon Hanakawa.”

“Excuse me?” Hanakawa said, shocked to hear his name out of nowhere. “Why should I be the first to go? Should we not discuss this and come to an agreement?”

“I’m the leader, so I decide the order,” Ryouko said, leaving no room for argument. Carol pushed him from behind, forcing him forward.

“All right, let’s go. You look like you’re panicking, but if you’re too slow, you lose, got it?”

“What? Ah, wait!”

“Rock, paper, scissors!”

If he stood around doing nothing, he would be disqualified. Hanakawa hurriedly threw out rock, but Gorbagion had thrown paper.

“Uh, it appears I have lost,” Hanakawa said.

“Looks that way.”

“How about best three out of five?”

“We didn’t talk about any rules like that, so it’s gotta be best of one, right?”

“I-I figured...”

“Hanakawa!” As Carol called out to him, Hanakawa turned to find a kunai planted at his feet. “You can kill yourself now!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be your second,” Ryouko declared, unsheathing her sword.

“Huh? What? How did things move so smoothly towards my own suicide? Why do you two show absolutely no hesitation?”

“Come on, as a Japanese man, you have to be a good sportsman!” Carol said.

“If you fail to follow the rules, the rock paper scissors match will be void,” Ryouko explained. “If that happens, we have no chance.”

“I said whoever loses dies, but I guess we never talked about how,” Gorbagion added. “If you’ll do it yourself, I have no problem with that.”

Hanakawa felt like he was sitting on a bed of nails. Everyone here was wishing for his death. None of them showed the least bit of hesitation.

Am I...in trouble?

Obviously, their opponents were happy to see him die, but even his supposed allies showed no sign of trying to save him.

Wait, wait, wait! Even so! I know they have acted from time to time as if they truly hate me, but they wouldn’t seriously abandon one of their own classmates, would they?

Hanakawa glanced back at Ryouko and Carol. There was no humor in their faces. It seemed the two of them had come to the conclusion that their only out in this situation was to abandon him.

“S-Someone! Please, help me! Ah, right! Friendship Counter! Sir Lute! This is a terrible predicament! Please rescue me!”

“Rescue you from what? You agreed to the rules, and you lost. You made this situation yourself,” Gorbagion said, entirely serious.

“Well, that is true, but...” Normally he would attempt to blabber something or other just to temporize, but in this case he’d be arguing against himself. This time he had really been backed into a corner.

And that was exactly what was needed to activate Friendship Counter. Hearing a click, Hanakawa found himself floating in the air. The ground below him had vanished, and now he was falling. At least, that was the impression he got, but he had no idea what was happening. In his confusion, he hit the ground hard. Although he must have fallen from quite a height, he was entirely unhurt thanks to the resilience granted to him by the Gift.

Looking up, he found a lavishly decorated ceiling above him. It seemed he was now indoors. Hanakawa looked around. He was in a large room, ornately decorated in white and gold.

“It is just one after another with these developments! What is happening?!”

“I just saved your life. You could be a bit more thankful, you know.”

Hanakawa looked for the source of the voice. Sitting on an extravagantly decorated throne was a girl in a pink dress.

“Alice! Ah! Is this Another Kingdom?!”

It seemed they were in Alice’s audience chamber, within the castle created by her Another Kingdom ability.

“I really don’t like it...but it looks like we have a little bit of a bond after all.”

Sage Alice. Hanakawa had once saved her from a fatal injury, and it seemed that was enough to create a bond between them.

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Chapter 16 — This Is My Princess Paradise

Alice's Another Kingdom skill gave her the ability to create a small world of her own that perfectly adhered to her desires. It seemed for now that Hanakawa had achieved some level of safety.

"Well...I am most grateful for your assistance," he said, "and would be even more so if you could do something about that Demon Lord's army..."

"How shameless can you be?" Alice replied. "I saved your life. Be glad I did that much for you."

"I suppose so! Above all, thank you, Alice!"

"Besides, I don't even know if I'd be able to beat them. Why is Shirou on their side anyway?"

"Is he an acquaintance of yours?" he asked.

"He's a Sage, so of course he is. That Demon Lord must have some power that lets him control Sages."

"But if you were to draw him into this world..."

"I can't force people to come here," Alice said.

"Was I not brought here rather forcibly?" Hanakawa asked.

"Yeah, that was a bit of a trick. I made a door on the ground below you. You falling through it counted as you choosing to go through of your own free will."

A door was created, opened, and the moment someone was through, it disappeared. She could trick someone who wasn't paying attention into entering her kingdom like that, but someone who was alert could simply avoid the door.

"If you had left the door there, might he not have entered of his own accord? You are invincible within Another Kingdom, as I recall." Since Hanakawa had suddenly fallen into the door, it would only be natural that his opponent would chase him through. From their exchange up until that point, he couldn't imagine the Demon Lord letting him try to escape.

"I used to think that," Alice replied. "I'm...not so confident anymore." Apparently her experience against the Omega Blade had scarred her somewhat.

"So then, what am I to do next?" Hanakawa asked.

"No idea. By the way, you can't stay here. This is my princess paradise. It's supposed to be filled with hot guys, not ugly nerds like you. Though if you really

beg, maybe I can give you a hut in the rotting village on the edge of the kingdom."

"Are we not being perhaps a bit overly discourteous here?!" But Hanakawa had no room to argue. Everything in this world went according to Alice's whims.

Alice went quiet for a time, so Hanakawa decided to do likewise rather than dig his hole any deeper by trying to speak.

"Van's made a claim on you."

"Can you not come up with some sort of excuse for me?!" Despite losing according to the rules he had agreed to, Hanakawa had fled the game rather than face the consequences. It only made sense that the guy running it would complain.

"He's saying he wants me to send you back."

"Wait, wait, wait! There is nothing there for me but death!"

"Ah, you don't have to worry about that. Your party already lost, so the Demon Lord's party has moved on to round three."

"Huh? How did that happen?"

"No clue." Alice pointed at a nearby wall, where a door suddenly appeared. It was all but an instruction to leave. "That Friendship Counter thing was a power given by the Great Sage, so I can't just ignore it, but I still have my position of Sage to take into account."

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Beside her throne, a number of knights in full plate armor appeared. Lifting their spears, they slowly started approaching Hanakawa.

“U-Umm! I seem to remember you only being able to create doors on the outside leading into Another Kingdom!”

“Van has a similar power, so if we work together, we can figure it out.”

Hanakawa was slowly pushed towards the door by the oncoming wall of knights.

“Urgh...fine! I will leave, then!”

The door opened, and Hanakawa stepped through.

The next moment, he was floating in the air. Naturally, this was followed by a quick fall and a sudden stop as he hit the ground. Though it hadn’t hurt much, the sudden change in the direction of gravity left him a little confused.

“Oh! Hanakawa! So you were okay!”

Looking up, he saw Carol and Ryouko standing above him.

“Where are we?” he asked. Looking around, he saw they were at the edge of a lake, the same place they encountered the Demon Lord’s army.

“We were thrown out of the battle channel,” Ryouko said. “It looks the same to me, though.”

“How did the rock paper scissors match go?” he asked.

“We gave up right after you left,” Carol replied offhandedly.

“Huh? If that was an option, why did we not do it from the start?”

“You’re the one who suddenly challenged them to rock paper scissors.”

“I suppose that is true...but what are we supposed to do now?”

“Half of the teams move on to the next round, so technically we might still have a chance, right?” Ryouko suggested.

“I see. Since we lost the first encounter, we were returned to the matching room. There were thirty-two parties in round two, correct? That would mean sixteen parties may move on. Perhaps we still have a chance.”

As a battle royale tournament, losing once didn’t mean instant elimination. They still had a chance to get back in the game. However, most other parties were no doubt already engaged. They didn’t have time to lounge around and wait if they wanted another shot at moving on.

“No time to waste, then!” Carole exclaimed.

With no real plan, Hanakawa felt nothing but unease about their prospects.

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Sora Akino was a high school student and a pop idol, and had received the class of Idol from the Gift. She was wearing a similar stage outfit as before, so she had likely received the same class upon entering Cavern Quest.

“I didn’t expect one of our classmates,” Yogiri said, shocked.

Tomochika felt the same way. If anyone, she would have expected it to be Hanakawa, Carol, or Ryouko, who would just be attempting to meet up with them. She didn’t know why Sora of all people would go out of her way to find them.

Sora stepped into the park, space flickering around them as she approached, signifying their shift into a battle channel.

“Hello. I see you’re here too, Dannoura.” Sora continued walking until she was standing just in front of them.

“Yeah...is there a point in asking why you’re here?” Tomochika replied. She had long since lost the optimism to feel happy about being reunited with her classmates. Anyone participating in the final stage of Cavern Quest must have heard the message from the Great Sage. It was obvious that Sora was here to kill Yogiri.

“I am more than happy to talk things through with you two. In fact, the main reason I’m here is to try and convince Takatou of something.”

“So, you’re not planning on fighting us?”

“Not without due warning, at least.” Although her phrasing was strange, it seemed she was at least willing to talk.

“Convince me of what?” Yogiri asked with a frown. “You want me to give up on going home?”

“Let me be blunt. Please kill yourself.”

“Well, that was definitely blunt!” Tomochika commented.

“Ryousuke Higashida. Yoshiaki Fukuhara. Yuuki Tachibana. Yukimasa Aihara. Romiko Jougasaki. Ayaka Shinozaki. Do these names sound familiar to you?”

Yogiri thought for a moment. “Are they all classmates of ours? I remember Tachibana and Aihara, at least.”

Though it seemed he was having trouble recalling, Tomochika understood immediately. At the very least, five of the six names she mentioned were people she knew Yogiri had killed.

“Is that all you can remember of them?” Sora seemed disappointed. “How dare you! Can you not at least remember the names of the people you’ve killed?!”

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“Why would I? All I’ve done is kill the people who tried to kill me.”

“They were your classmates, people who suffered and celebrated alongside you! Do you not feel any guilt over having taken their lives?!”

“I mean, it’s not like we were all that close.” Though Yogiri took his studies seriously, he didn’t interact all that much with the other students. Even Tomochika had never spoken with him before coming to this world.

Now that she thought about it, that was likely due to his ability. If he got close to people, he might accidentally get them involved in his situation, and it would be more difficult for him to cut them off if they turned out to be enemies. At least, that was her guess.

“I’ve only done what I could. Are you saying I should have let them kill me?”

“Yes,” Sora replied instantly, catching Tomochika off guard. “If you had died, those six would have been saved. It’s rather simple logic, don’t you think?”

It seems this one would have no difficulty with the trolley problem, Mokomoko mused.

“From the outside it’s easy to make a decision based purely on numbers,” Yogiri said, “but it’s different when you’re on the scales yourself.”

“Of course not. If I were in your place, I would have killed myself long ago to avoid causing problems for others.”

“I see. I guess our values are too far apart for us to come to an understanding.”

“What do you believe, Dannoura? We now know that if he dies, the people he killed will be returned to life. Do you not think that to be the correct course of action? Shouldn’t you be trying to convince him of the same?”

“Oh, so it’s about *me* now!” The sudden shift caught Tomochika off guard again. “Well...I’m pretty sure I’ve said this before: when I decided to support what Takatou was doing, I agreed I was equally responsible for it. If I didn’t agree with what he was doing, I would have stopped traveling with him. But I’m still here, aren’t I? I came to terms with facing the consequences of that choice a long time ago.”

“I see,” Sora replied. “So that is your answer, knowing he killed not only six innocent classmates, but sixty million innocent people besides. You seem to take this all so lightly. How can the two of you bear the weight of such sin alone?”

“Who knows? If we can’t carry it, it’ll just fall off our shoulders, right? Don’t expect it to crush us or anything.”

“Ootori did mention you were abnormal. I had hoped I could convince you to

see things my way, but it appears he was correct. You two are quite mad."

Five men appeared at Sora's side. She must have used her power somehow.

Yogiri Takatou vs. Sora Akino: FIGHT!!!

It seemed their appearance was enough to trigger the start of the battle. The five men in full concert gear charged as one, and likewise collapsed as one due to Yogiri's power.

"I am quite surprised. You really have no qualms killing innocent people, do you?"

"That's pretty bold, coming from the one who sent them to attack me." Yogiri sighed. If Sora had summoned them and instructed them to attack him, it was technically her responsibility.

"What do you mean? They are simply my fans, acting of their own free will."

"You can't actually believe that ridiculous logic, can you?!" Tomochika exclaimed. But since Sora hadn't been controlling them directly, the fans had died and she had survived.

"You know my power, right?" Yogiri said. "You don't actually think you can win, do you?"

"I am aware of the situation," she answered. "So this will be a war of attrition. I understand your mentality is thoroughly warped, but how many innocent people can you bear to kill?"

More fans appeared, men and women of all ages, eyes brimming with bloodlust. Though Sora gave them no instructions, they bore a clear hatred towards Yogiri.

"What you're doing is way worse, isn't it?!" Tomochika said. "What happened to the idea of killing people in droves being bad?!"

"I am only working to make everyone happy," she replied. "My fans are happy to die for me, and if Takatou dies, everyone will be happy. Where is the cruelty in that?"

"Okay, it's useless! This girl is a lost cause!"

"If Takatou dies, the world will be reset, and everyone who died will return to life," Sora continued. "What meaning is there in being selective about the process required to accomplish that?"

"Too bad. I'm not going to die to save a bunch of strangers." Despite saying that, Yogiri made no move to attack. She still had yet to try and harm him directly. However, he couldn't leave the situation to develop.

"Should *I* fight her?" Tomochika asked.

Do you think you can kill her? Mokomoko asked. *It appears to me that those*

“fans” appear spontaneously around her. I do not think knocking her unconscious will make them stop.

It wasn’t a question of whether Tomochika was physically capable of taking another person’s life, but whether she was mentally ready to do so. The thought of actively attempting to kill a person was a particularly heavy one.

“Gaaaaaaah! Of course! I *knew* something like this was bound to happen!”

As Tomochika hesitated, a hysterical yet all-too-familiar voice filled the air.

“Why are *you* here?” Yogiri sighed.

“How should I know?! More importantly, I thought you said your fans were illusions created from magic, Sora!”

Standing in front of Sora, wearing a common cheering outfit and holding a set of glow sticks, was Hanakawa.

Chapter 17 — Quickly, While I Can Keep It Suppressed! Flee!

After leaving Another Kingdom, Hanakawa had returned to searching for an opponent in round two of the tournament. The Demon Lord's army had defeated Hanakawa's party and moved on to round three, but there was still a chance the three of them could find another opponent to defeat. However, with so much time having passed since the beginning of the round, there weren't very many parties that hadn't concluded their battles. As Hanakawa had started to panic, unable to find any opposing parties, he found himself suddenly standing among Sora Akino's fans, facing Yogiri.

"Sorry, Hanakawa," Yogiri said, looking almost apologetic.

"Wait, wait, wait! You sound like the protagonist reluctantly about to strike down a friend who is being manipulated! Wait... Reluctantly?"

"A little bit."

"I see," Sora said. "I thought that perhaps you could kill someone you had no knowledge of, but you might hesitate to kill a classmate." Sora's ability wasn't one she could activate or control, but it appeared to serve her desires, even if unconsciously.

"Would killing Sora not be enough to resolve this situation?!" Hanakawa pleaded.

"Even if I kill Akino, the fans will still be here and will try to get revenge on me. I'll have to kill them anyway," Yogiri replied.

"Of course, but...but... Ah! I am not doing this of my own free will!" At some point, Hanakawa had begun charging. Deep inside he had the feeling that he needed to kill Yogiri, so his body was acting of its own volition. Unlike the rest of the fans, Hanakawa understood the threat Yogiri posed well enough to know it was better not to attack him. Even if the Fanatic Fans skill was urging him to attack, he knew how outmatched he was.

"I guess I can't let this go on forever. Let's get it over with," Yogiri muttered.

Hanakawa paled. It seemed he had finally resolved himself to killing Sora and all of her fans.

"Noooooo! Save meeeeeee!!!"

“Got it. I just gotta kill her, right?”

Turning around, Hanakawa saw Sora’s head drop to the ground.

“Huh?”

Behind him stood what looked like a common thug—a lanky man wearing leather pants and a studded jacket. With the shock of the new arrival, Hanakawa barely registered the other fans around him collapsing to the ground.

“If it isn’t Sir Yoshifumi!” he exclaimed.

The Sage Yoshifumi. For a time, Hanakawa had served as his jester. It seemed that was enough of a relationship for Friendship Counter to establish a bond between them.

“I can’t do nothin’ about that guy, so figure the rest out on your own,” the Sage warned him.

Whether this was too much of a bother for him, or he simply resented being summoned against his will, Yoshifumi immediately vanished.

“What just happened?” Yogiri asked, clearly shocked.

“I felt like I saw a guy there for a second. He seemed...a little familiar.” Tomochika was similarly perplexed. The death of Sora hadn’t fazed them much, reinforcing in Hanakawa’s mind that there was definitely something wrong with those two.

“Guh! My power is going out of control! Quickly, while I can keep it suppressed! Flee!”

The energy gathering in Hanakawa’s right hand was starting to overflow. Using his left hand, he desperately tried to restrain it.

“Back to middle school, huh?” Tomochika commented with a cringe.

“This is not the time for that! I am worried about myself here! I am worried about what happens if Sir Takatou retaliates!”

Yogiri Takatou Wins!

The announcement played in the air, confirming Yogiri’s victory. A few moments later, he and Tomochika vanished, no doubt sent back to the Antechamber Area to await round three.

Hanakawa fired his charged energy blast up into the sky. With Yogiri gone, his innate desire to attack had vanished.

“So...umm...have I just been left alone here?”

Looking around, he finally saw that he was standing in a park. He had been removed from the battle channel, but his companions were nowhere to be found. Hanakawa was totally lost.

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As the start of the second round was announced, Lynel and the goddess Vahanato stepped out of the Antechamber Area and appeared in a corridor. Walking down it, they emerged into an open space surrounded by rings of seats for spectators. It gave Lynel the distinct impression of an arena.

“Perfect!” Vahanato exclaimed.

“It certainly does look like a place designed for fighting...”

In the first round, Vahanato’s Goddess Beam had instantly annihilated their opponent. She now stepped boldly into the middle of the arena, Lynel following reluctantly behind her.

“With such a great place to fight, we can probably just wait for someone to show up!”

“Will they, though?” Lynel asked. “Can’t you use your powers to look for someone?”

“No way. Can’t be bothered.”

In truth, Vahanato wasn’t supposed to have entered this world yet. After everything had been reset, the new timeline was supposed to generally follow the previous one. However, because of her connection to Lynel, the goddess had managed to force her way in early. Due to this unorthodox entry, she wasn’t able to use her full abilities and was using her power rather sparingly.

After waiting for some time, they heard a sound coming from the door opposite them. Someone was approaching. The new arrival was a party of three, one of which Lynel recognized.

“It’s the Hedgehog!”

Back on the top of the pyramid, Lynel had pretended to ignore it, but that wouldn’t work here. The sight of the creature brought back all sorts of terrifying memories. He had been killed by the Hedgehog countless times. Every time he died, his Random Walk ability would bring him back in time to try again, and his repeated trial and error eventually led to him meeting Yogiri and Tomochika in the Garula Canyon.

“Oh, perfect! I’m glad it came to me!” Vahanato declared. “It’s still on my revenge list!”

“But isn’t something strange?” Lynel asked. “I don’t remember it acting like that.”

Lynel’s impression of the Hedgehog was that of a literal killing machine. It attacked anything and everything, with no apparent thought behind its actions.

However, it now felt like it possessed some measure of intelligence as it followed obediently behind the two women.

Of course, there was no running away. They had been waiting here specifically for an enemy to appear. The scenery around them flickered as they shifted into another channel for the battle. Their opponent stopped a small distance away.

“So, you’re a god too, huh? I’m Hiruko. This is my ma, Luu. This guy just gave us some model number or whatever, so no way I’m remembering that. I guess I’ll call him Spiky.”

Apparently, the woman in the lead with long hair and in flashy clothes was called Hiruko. The smaller woman behind her, very much cloaked in the aura of a goddess, was Luu. “Spikey” seemed to refer to the blade-covered, armored Hedgehog.

“There were two more people with us, but they died last round. We said they could stick with us if they wanted to, but we had no reason to protect ’em. Anyway, what’re we gonna do for rules?” After talking on her own for quite a while, Hiruko finally turned the conversation over to them.

“Can I ask something before we get to the rules?” Vahanato said.

“What’s up?”

“That, uh, Spikey? He’s not normally that calm, is he? He punched a sword into my head out of nowhere once! It was like he was looking for something, but when he found out it wasn’t me, he just left me for dead!” It seemed she was riling herself up by bringing back the old memories.

“No clue. Ask him yourself.” Hiruko pushed the Hedgehog forward.

“Though I am aware the world has been reset, I have no memories of the time before that happened. As such, I have no knowledge of who you are or what history exists between us, so I am unable to answer any questions you may have. Moreover, I cannot take responsibility for anything that happened in the previous world, in keeping with the principle held by the majority of worlds, which do not hold one responsible for actions they took while not of sound mind. If what you claim is true, however, I can understand your frustration and thus extend my sincere apologies.”

“Whaaaaat?!” Vahanato snapped, no doubt furious.

“Oh, you can totally talk,” Hiruko commented, apparently also surprised by the speech.

“Uh, I’m actually curious about something. Can I ask a question too?” Lynel interrupted.

“Go for it.”

“Is Spikey your friend?”

“Sorta,” Hiruko replied. “Only for now. This rude guy is actually here to kill ma, but she’s in a bit of a weird place right now. He wants to wait for her to be back to normal. So he agreed to help us get the pieces of her body back.”

“Precisely,” the Hedgehog added. “My target is the individual who currently refers to herself as Luu. However, I have confirmed that the materials that make up her being have replicated to an incredible degree. Defeating Luu in this state will not accomplish my goal.”

“The fact you make it sound like you could kill her anytime you please is kind of annoying,” Hiruko commented.

“Detecting the sealed fragments of Luu’s being is beyond my capabilities. As such, the most efficient course of action for me is to utilize Luu’s ability to detect the Philosopher’s Stones herself and wait for her to collect them. Beyond that, assisting her with the collection will accelerate the process, so I have agreed to cooperate.”

“By the way, the reason we were last to make it to the top of the pyramid was because we were picking up the pieces of ma that were scattered inside it,” Hiruko added. With the destruction of the pyramid, a large number of adventurers had been killed, the Philosopher’s Stones they were carrying left unattended. The group of them had gone around collecting those abandoned stones. “But what a weird pair you guys are. Why are you so interested in Spikey?”

“Well...we have quite a bit of history,” Lynel explained.

“Why are we having such a chill chat anyway? We’re supposed to be fighting here!”

“Maybe, but it’s pretty obvious we have no way of winning,” Vahanato said plainly.

“Huh? We don’t?” Lynel was shocked at her admission. Normally, Vahanato was so arrogant, he had never expected this from her.

“Of course not. I’m not in full form yet, and she’s way above me as a goddess anyway.”

“True enough,” Hiruko agreed. “Battles between gods are all just a numbers game in the end. Not much room for creativity. Still, plenty of people out there are happy to fight regardless.”

“I’ve got no quarrel with you two, so here’s an idea: why don’t you make that guy fight?” Vahanato suggested, pointing at the Hedgehog. “If we beat him, let

us join your team."

"Oh? Doesn't bother me. I couldn't care less if he wins or loses."

"As long as he doesn't mind, I'm fine with it," Luu said, speaking for the first time.

"I accept your challenge," the Hedgehog replied.

"Let's do it, then," Hiruko declared.

Goddess Luu vs. Goddess Vahanato: FIGHT!!!

Although they hadn't come up with any specific rules, the default was a fight to the death. However, since it seemed like Vahanato was after a one-on-one, Lynel stepped back to the edge of the arena. The other team seemed to have the same idea, as Hiruko and Luu floated up into the stands.

"Now, what are you going to try this time?" Vahanato said as an array of weapons materialized in the air behind her. A straight sword, a chakram, an axe, a spear, a lance, a katana, and a shield rose to fixed positions around her, forming a protective barrier and becoming her means of attack.

The weapons shone, unleashing an unrestrained beam of light at the Hedgehog, who responded simply by swinging a bladed arm. The light, the space it occupied, and the weapons it was coming from were all sliced to pieces.

"Come on, let me play a bit..." Vahanato was, similarly, sliced in half, a thin line cutting her in two from the top of her head straight down to the groin. Perhaps that wasn't enough to immediately kill her, but it was enough to prove she had lost the fight.

Lynel began to panic, lost for words. He had figured things would work out somehow, but the truth wasn't so kind. This match was a simple measuring contest. They had both unleashed their attacks, and the stronger had won. The Hedgehog was stronger than Vahanato.

The goddess turned and slowly made her way back to where Lynel was standing. "Jeez! Why is this all happening to me?! I just wanted to see my darling again!"

"U-Umm..."

"You can just surrender now. There's nothing for them to gain by killing you. Here, give me your hands."

"O-Okay..." Lynel held out his hands as he was told. A number of rainbow stones dropped into his open palms—the all-too-familiar star crystals. So many fell that they started overflowing and pouring onto the ground.

"The game's shutting down, so I'll give you a huge amount as a send-off. They'll work for a little bit after I die, so make sure you use them all in time."

“U-Urgh... Lady Vahanato...”

“What? Are you that sentimental?”

Lynel had met a terrible fate thanks to Vahanato. He was about to finally be freed from her, something he should have celebrated, but instead it looked like he was on the verge of tears. Maybe his journey through the postreset world had been that meaningful to him.

“But...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m a god, so I’ll pop up again sooner or later. Maybe we’ll even meet again.”

“No...I’d really rather not,” Lynel replied. “You’d obviously put me through something terrible again.”

“Wow, what kind of a send-off is that?” Leaving behind a pile of star crystals, she vanished.

“Jeez, if you’re going to get all sappy, you’re going to make us look like the bad guys,” Hiruko sighed once the whole display was over.

“I give up...” Lynel muttered.

Goddess Luu Wins!

Lynel’s surrender was accepted, and the fight concluded.

“You want to tag along with us?” Hiruko asked.

“No, I’m okay, thanks.”

“Okay. See ya.” With that, Hiruko and her party disappeared, returning to the Antechamber Area.

“For now...I guess I should find somewhere to hide.”

Lynel began gathering the star crystals together.

Chapter 18 — Knowing Them Doesn’t Bother Me That Much

Last Boss Quest, Final Stage, Round Three: Start!

After a short break in the Antechamber Area, Yogiri and Tomochika saw the announcement.

“All right, let’s go.”

“Round three has sixteen parties, right?” Tomochika asked.

“Only four rounds to go, then. I thought it would be a pain with so many people, but this actually isn’t that bad.”

“Yeah, we haven’t had much difficulty yet...”

Since all they had to do was defeat whatever enemy showed up, Yogiri didn’t feel like it was all that much work.

Standing up, they headed out the door, which took them to a barren wasteland. The ground around them was empty, reddish brown earth, which came to an abrupt end. Beyond that was nothing but clouds, so this must have been the edge of the floating island. In the opposite direction was a forest, beyond which they could see part of a large building. That was likely a castle, making it the center of the island.

“Want me to yell again?”

“Please.”

“Yogiri Takatou is right here!”

They had both grown used to her yelling by this point. Yogiri stepped away and covered his ears, while Tomochika made sure not to shout so loud as to hurt her own ears.

“I feel like we’re being really lazy about this, though,” Tomochika commented.

“I guess we’re not really doing much, are we?” But with the other participants prioritizing killing Yogiri, this was the most efficient way to proceed. “Speaking of which, wouldn’t it be possible to attack someone before the fight actually started?” he asked, the idea suddenly occurring to him.

“I wonder. You get moved to the battle channel when you’re within ten

meters of each other, right? I don't know what happens if you fight before then. There are plenty of long-range attacks you can do from outside that distance..." If that was allowed, though, there didn't seem much point in moving them to another channel in the first place.

"We are not in the same space until we encounter an opponent, it appears." An answer came to them from the forest.

"Oh, Celestina!" Tomochika exclaimed. Emerging from the woods was the quite familiar hotel concierge.

"I have investigated our surroundings with my threads and been unable to make contact with anyone before approaching within the set distance. I have, however, been able to manipulate the environment around them, similar to how you have, Miss Dannoura."

Though he wasn't sure it was quite the right analogy, Yogiri guessed it was like they were halfway outside of space. They couldn't interact directly with each other, but they could still affect the environment around them enough to communicate. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to hear or see each other.

"Did you come here to kill me?" Yogiri asked.

"Yes. It is most inappropriate behavior towards a hotel guest, but...considering the issues you have caused for the other guests, I cannot avoid it."

"I guess that makes sense. It's not like we were your only guests."

This would be a bit difficult. Celestina had helped them quite a bit in their travels and wasn't a bad person at all. However, her sense of responsibility had brought her to kill Yogiri anyway, and it wasn't like Yogiri would stand by and let her kill him.

Celestina approached, shifting them into the battle channel.

"What about the rules?"

"In the end, I must take your life, so specifying any further details seems meaningless to me," Celestina responded.

"Oh, okay."

Yogiri Takatou vs Celestina: FIGHT!!!

An announcement played in the air above them, indicating the start of the battle.

"I have already trapped you with my thread. If you do not resist, I will allow Miss Dannoura to escape here unharmed, and will ensure your death is as painless as possible."

“Sorry, I can’t do that,” Yogiri replied.

“Huh? Thread?” Tomochika looked around but couldn’t see anything. They had fought someone who had used a similar weapon back in the tower, but they had been able to perceive the threads back then. Assuming she wasn’t bluffing, Celestina’s threads seemed much thinner, to the point where even Tomochika couldn’t see them.

“Then how about this? I will kill Miss Dannoura first. Even if you can respond to killing intent, surely you cannot respond to killing intent aimed at others.”

“That’s not going to work.” As Yogiri spoke, Celestina collapsed.

Yogiri Takatou Wins!

“Huh?” Tomochika blurted out, taken aback by how quickly the fight had ended. Maybe she’d thought there was still room for them to discuss things.

“Knowing them doesn’t bother me that much,” Yogiri said.

As she had warned them, Celestina had made an attempt on Tomochika’s life, so Yogiri had killed her. That was all there was to it.

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As the third round began, Hiruko’s group left the Antechamber Area and arrived in an open field. In the distance they could see a forest, a lake, and a castle, but around them there was nothing but grassland.

“Hey, you’ve got a sensor thing, right? Why can’t you find some opponents for us?” Hiruko asked the Hedgehog.

“There is no need. An opponent already approaches.”

Something fell from the sky, landing hard and shaking the ground around them. Immediately the scenery flickered as they moved into the battle channel. Standing in front of them was a party of five.

“Yo. I’m Demon Lord Gorbagion. These are my Four Heavenly Kings.”

The black-haired boy in the lead was Gorbagion, with his Four Heavenly Kings arrayed behind him.

“Chop chop, let’s keep this moving. We’re just gonna fight, yeah?” The fact he had decided to land close enough to trigger the battle channel left Hiruko assuming they were just going to fight.

Goddess Luu vs. Demon Lord Gorbagion: FIGHT!!!

The announcement played in the air between them, meaning the default death match rules must have been applied.

“Now that I think about it, it’s kind of interesting how those announcements give some of us titles and not others, huh?” Gorbagion said.

“True. Makes things easy to understand, don’t you think?” Hiruko felt no need to engage in small talk. Lifting her right hand, she fired a beam of light wide enough to engulf Gorbagion’s whole party. The straight line carved through the grassland, incinerating everything before it.

When the light finally winked out, Gorbagion was the only one left standing. Even then, he was barely recognizable, thoroughly burned from head to toe. There was no sign of what was once his Four Heavenly Kings but a couple of pairs of glasses lying on the seared earth.

“You gotta play the part of the Demon Lord, yeah? Having the small fry around wouldn’t have changed much anyway.”

“I guess not. I haven’t really gone all out yet either.” Gorbagion picked up one of the pairs of glasses.

“Come on, you sound like an idiot,” Hiruko said.

“If you think I’m lying, then bring it on.”

“Fine.” After one attack, he already seemed on the verge of death. She didn’t need any tricks. More of the same would finish him off easily.

Hiruko fired another beam of light, and then five more to ensure the fight was decided. But after the smoke cleared, Gorbagion was still standing there. Not only was he still alive, but his incinerated clothing was starting to repair itself.

“Oh?” Hiruko started to feel suspicious. Unlike her first attack, the follow-ups didn’t seem to be having much of an effect.

“Hey now, come on. Let me have a turn. You can’t hog the spotlight.”

“Don’t care,” Hiruko said, firing another beam of light. As it struck Gorbagion, the Demon Lord rushed forward, pressing through the searing ray and closing in on her. Hiruko responded with a solid left hook, landing squarely in Gorbagion’s face, but not before his kick tore into her stomach.

“What the heck? You think that’ll bother me?”

“I’m still not going all out,” Gorbagion replied.

“Oh, shut it! Just fight already, then!”

His attack hadn’t hurt her in the least. Hiruko unleashed a barrage of punches, sending Gorbagion flying, but he soon recovered and lunged back into the fight.

Something odd seemed to be happening, though. As the fight progressed, Gorbagion seemed to be growing more resistant to her attacks, and his own attacks were starting to get more and more painful.

“What is with you?!” Hiruko swung another fist in anger, but the impact seemed harder on her hand than on Gorbagion’s face. The Demon Lord ignored the punch, delivering a swift knee to Hiruko’s gut, forcing the goddess back.

“I told you, didn’t I? I wasn’t going all out yet.”

“And I’m telling *you* that going all out won’t make a difference!”

Frustrated by her lack of progress, Hiruko launched a gravity blast, focusing enough gravity on a single point to crush and kill anyone around it. Gorbagion, however, withstood the attack, bent over but still standing.

“I’m still not using my full power... That’s my power. No matter what I do, I’m never going all out.” Gorbagion stretched out his right hand.

Getting a bad feeling, Hiruko immediately leaped backwards, only to see the space she had once occupied disappear. A half-sphere had been neatly gouged out of the ground she had once been standing on. At the same time, countless holes had opened up in her body. Gorbagion’s attack must have scattered outward as multiple small scale erasures.

“You think you can kill a god like that?!” Hiruko shouted back, regenerating instantly.

“Of course not. But there’s something like a real part of you in there. I know that.”

Hiruko fired another beam of light, putting more strength into it than before. She was beyond keeping up appearances. The intense ray struck Gorbagion head-on. As he wavered slightly with the impact, the Hedgehog rushed forward and swung its bladed arms, then he lifted his left hand and unleashed another erasure attack.

A slash against erasure. Gorbagion came out on top, the Hedgehog’s upper body vanishing.

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“Ma! This guy seems dangerous!”

“A bit late for that,” Gorbagion said. “Then again, I get stronger as the fight goes on, so I couldn’t fight like this at the beginning.”

“Shut it!” Hiruko fired another beam of light, but this time Gorbagion ignored it. As it washed over him, he casually walked forward.

“I’m never going all out. That means I can keep getting stronger forever.”

While Hiruko’s mind raced to find a way to deal with him, Gorbagion stepped up beside her. Hiruko punched him with all of her strength, but the Demon Lord simply sidestepped the attack and punched a hand into her chest.

“Hey, that’s sexual harassment, you know?”

“Not my fault you hid your core there,” Gorbagion replied.

“Ma...run. Leave the Great Sage for later...” Hiruko felt herself starting to come apart. Unable to do any more, she could only hope that Luu would be okay.

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In their compressed band of time, the fight seemed to stretch on forever, but eventually Gorbagion came out on top. Luu was unbelievably strong, and it seemed like Gorbagion would lose any number of times, but in the end he had never shown off his full power.

Demon Lord Gorbagion Wins!

Luu vanished, leaving Gorbagion as the winner.

Whether his opponent was a god or not, no matter how powerful they were, it never mattered to him. He never used his full power. No matter how much weaker he was than his opponent, he was never using his full strength, so he always had a chance to turn the tables on them. Because he would never make it to using his full power, there was no limit to how strong he could grow.

Once again he found himself in the waiting room, and he plopped down on one of the couches. He was a little tired, but not so much as to hinder him going forward. Gorbagion pulled a pair of glasses out of his jeans pocket and threw them on the ground. The glasses started to smoke, and before long the six-eyed Graze was standing before him.

“My apologies. It seems I failed to be of any use,” Graze said, bowing his head deeply.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m the only one who can do anything against gods like that. Bring back the other three, please.”

“Very well. Then, with these Backup Glasses...” Pulling three pairs of glasses out of his pockets, he tossed them on the ground, much as Gorbagion had done before. They began to smoke, and before long the Four Heavenly Kings had been revived.

“It’s kind of unfair how much you can do with just glasses.”

Backup Glasses stored the information of anyone who wore them, allowing them to be restored at a later time. Graze had a limitless amount of related items like this.

“Not at all. The absurdness of my power pales in comparison to yours,” Graze answered.

“Next is round four. Should be far fewer people around now.”

The fourth round would have eight parties. Until now Gorbagion had just attacked whoever was closest, but with so few parties left in contention, it should be much easier to seek out specific prey.

He decided it was about time to take down Yogiri.

Chapter 19 — Say a Creepy Chant, or Strike a Pose, Anything!

As round four began, Yogiri and Tomochika found themselves in the city surrounding the castle. They moved to an open square with a fountain, thinking it would be easier than fighting in the alleyways.

“Yogiri Takatou is right here!” Tomochika shouted as always, as Yogiri was already standing off to the side with his ears covered. After quite a wait, worrying that no one was going to show up, something fell from the sky. The buildings around them shook as the scenery flickered, moving them into the battle channel.

A party of five had appeared in front of them. A boy in a T-shirt and jeans, a huge man with skin like stone, a thin man with three pairs of eyes and three pairs of glasses to match, a woman with hair long enough to cover her face and reach the ground, and a young man in glasses and a lab coat.

The entire party seemed rather mismatched, but Yogiri did recognize one of them. The man in the lab coat was Shirou, a Sage. He was involved with running Cavern Quest and had appeared once to explain a change in the rules to them.

“Yo. I’m Demon Lord Gorbagion. These are my Four Heavenly Kings.” The boy in the front appeared to be their leader.

“Gorbagion? I feel like I’ve heard that name before,” Yogiri said.

“That one guy mentioned him, right?” Tomochika replied. “That ‘weakest’ guy.”

Her reminder sparked the memory again. Back in Base Town, they had been attacked by a horned boy calling himself Naltine, one of Gorbagion’s Four Heavenly Kings.

“But he’s not here,” Yogiri observed.

“I guess not. He said he was the weakest, so maybe he died?”

“It’s pretty common for the Demon Lord to switch out his Four Heavenly Kings, right?” Gorbagion said. Yogiri supposed if the Demon Lord himself said so, that had to be true, although he didn’t care all that much about his enemy’s situation.

“Anyway, why would the Demon Lord’s army join a game like this?”

“Because someone more evil than the Demon Lord showed up. No matter what we do, we’re being overshadowed by you.”

“Not much I can do about that,” Yogiri said.

“We’ve had people attack us for all sorts of reasons before, but this is a new one, huh?” Tomochika commented.

“Anyway, please die.”

Yogiri Takatou vs. Demon Lord Gorbagion: FIGHT!!!

It seemed there’d be no room for negotiation, as one word from Gorbagion triggered the start of the fight.

“Breia, go give him a hit for me,” Gorbagion instructed.

“Got it!” The man with stonelike skin, Breia, stepped forward. He looked like the kind of person to be overly reliant on brute force, and sure enough he charged at Yogiri without a second thought. Winding up his huge fist for a punch, he immediately collapsed to the ground.

“I see,” Gorbagion said. “Go ahead and give it a try, Haruka.”

“Hey...” Haruka murmured, her face still hidden behind her hair. “What happened to the dog?”

“The dog? Oh, Dai? We split up.” Even remembering it caused a twinge of pain in Yogiri’s heart.

“Why?! I said I wanted him!” The sudden angry shout caught Yogiri off guard. He hadn’t expected a reaction like that.

Haruka vanished. Tomochika turned around, and Yogiri shortly after, to see her lying on the ground behind them. Apparently she was the speed type.

“It would be a lot faster if you all just attacked me at once,” Yogiri said. Even in this situation, he didn’t plan on using his power proactively. Restricting his power to be used for self-defense ended up with the same result over and over, so even if it drew the fight out longer, he wanted to keep to that principle.

“All right. Graze, Shirou, take him together.”

The six-eyed man and the Sage stepped forward, both collapsing immediately.

“Jeez, this is so boring!” Gorbagion snapped. “Can’t you at least *do* something?! Say a creepy chant, or strike a pose, anything!”

“I don’t really have the chance to do anything like that, though.”

The Four Heavenly Kings had been slain, but Yogiri hadn’t done much of anything. They had all been killed by his power automatically activating in response to danger.

“But you understand my power by now, right? Why don’t you surrender?”

Yogiri tried.

"You think any Demon Lord would do that?"

"Yeah, I guess that would be pretty lame," Yogiri said, thinking of this in terms of a video game. He would want to throw a game that ended that way across the room. "But still, you have no chance of winning."

"Don't I? Hey, girl over there. You're the next member of the Four Heavenly Kings!"

"Huh?" Tomochika blinked. "Uh, I'd rather not."

A moment of shocked silence passed, Gorbagion being entirely unprepared for rejection.

Unfortunately, that kind of attack will not work while I am here, Mokomoko smirked, lounging in the air beside Tomochika.

"That was an attack?"

Perhaps not. It was more like a curse forcing one to enter into his army.

No doubt he had intended to make Yogiri and Tomochika fight each other. It was true that Yogiri would have had a difficult time fighting back if it was against Tomochika, but he figured he could find a way to deal with her.

"So, now what?" Yogiri asked.

"I understand your power, now. But I'm still not at full strength myself."

"That's easy enough to say, but you haven't done anything yet," Yogiri sighed. The Demon Lord's declaration felt like it had come out of nowhere.

"Don't be in such a rush. I get stronger as the fight goes on." Gorbagion lifted his right hand towards the two of them, clearly intending to fire something. But naturally, he then collapsed to the ground. Whatever he had intended to do must have been dangerous enough to kill Yogiri, so Yogiri's power had activated to stop it.

Yogiri Takatou Wins!

"So, uhh...I guess we never got to see his full power," Tomochika said.

Yes, it would have been nice to draw things out a bit longer.

Both Tomochika and Mokomoko seemed a bit disappointed.

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Sage Van sat in the audience chamber of the castle. The fourth round had placed him there, so he had decided to stay and wait. It was the final area of Cavern Quest's final field, a castle in the middle of a floating kingdom. The castle itself was surrounded by a city that was uninhabited. The fields of Cavern

Quest hadn't been designed with that much detail, only put together roughly to make an interesting environment.

It gave a really strong impact for the last quest. The idea of a castle floating in the sky was interesting. Those vague ideas had led Van to create the huge bank of clouds, a stone disc floating inside of them, and then place forests, rivers, and other natural scenery around a castle and its town.

Originally the last quest was supposed to be a fight to the death among seven parties, so there wasn't supposed to be any boss waiting in the audience chamber here, but for now Van took a seat on the throne. Each season of Cavern Quest had a different last boss, but across all seasons, once could consider Van himself to be the ultimate final boss, so him ending up here felt a little ironic.

"The last boss being the developer of the game is a bit too meta for my liking, though."

But this was what the Great Sage had ordered, so there was nothing he could do about it. At the very least, he wanted to put on a performance that Mitsuki would enjoy watching.

"Looks like someone's here."

Someone had entered the castle. It wouldn't be hard for him to look up who it was, but he was content to wait. After a short time, a single person stepped into the audience chamber. He was a man with red hair in something resembling a casual kimono.

"Yo. You supposed to be the king?" As the man approached, the two of them shifted into the battle channel.

"Nah, I just showed up here by chance and decided to have a seat while I could. Are you from the same Japan as Yogiri Takatou?"

"Ah, you mean my clothes? I picked these up from a world I visited a few trips ago. I really liked them, so I've been wearing this style ever since."

Maybe the guy was not actually connected to Japan at all. It wasn't unlikely that some world somewhere would have the same style of clothing.

"Anyway, my name is Kyuuzaburou Suzuki."

"So are you from Japan or not?" Van sighed.

"Does it matter? There are plenty of worlds that look the same, even if they don't use the same language."

Though they could speak freely, in a different world the language barrier between them would become an evident problem. For a Sage, automatic translation was simple enough, so much so that it happened unconsciously. Because of that, Van didn't really hear the words the man was speaking.

“Okay then, Kyuuzaburou. I’m the administrator of this game. You don’t have any chance of actually beating me, so are you sure you want to fight? Giving up is probably the fastest way out of this for you.”

“Hmm. What does that really mean, though? Just saying ‘I have no chance’ doesn’t tell me anything. Really, it makes me want to give it a shot.”

As expected, such a short explanation wouldn’t convince anyone, so Van decided to continue. He knew that someone who had made it this far wouldn’t give up that quickly.

“Well, let’s see. In simple terms, I can freely manipulate the world around us. I can open up a hole beneath your feet, or remove the oxygen from the air around you, or change gravity to crush you. I can also send you somewhere completely different...though since we’re in a battle channel, I wouldn’t send you outside of it.” While he couldn’t directly affect the players in the game, he could change the environment around them as much as he wished.

“That doesn’t sound any more convincing to me. Anything else?”

“I see. I guess there’s still value in trying if you’re desperate. So how about this, then? As the maker of this game, I’m invincible inside it. No attacks can work on me at all.”

“Ah, I’ve heard of things like that before. But I’ve also heard of Game Masters forgetting to set the invulnerable flag on themselves and dying anyway.”

“Unfortunately, in this case, it’s not a flag to be set. As long as the game world exists, I’m invincible.”

“I guess I can follow that logic. You and the game are basically inseparable.”

“So, do you understand?”

“I think so. Let’s give it a shot.”

“Yeah, I figured,” Van sighed. He had assumed this was how it would go the moment he had laid eyes on his opponent. No matter how much they talked, there was no chance of the other guy surrendering.

“Death match rules are fine for me,” Kyuuzaburou said.

“Sure. Of course, feel free to surrender at any time.”

Sage Van vs. Kyuuzaburou Suzuki: FIGHT!!!

The announcement indicating the start of the fight played in the air between them.

Van didn’t move from his throne, watching to see what Kyuuzaburou would do. He had no intention of trying to set up an instant death trap for him. He wanted to see what Kyuuzaburou would try. Though the stranger seemed rather aloof, he couldn’t have just ignored everything Van had told him. Being the

Game Master lent an air of credibility to everything he said, so it would take more than wishful thinking to throw doubt on his claims.

Basically, even knowing Van's abilities, Kyuuzaburou still thought he had a way to win. Van found that interesting in and of itself. He couldn't imagine losing, so he wanted to see what kind of strategy someone else would come up with. Of course, if Kyuuzaburou's plan actually worked, Van would probably end up dead, but he wasn't especially worried about that. Van losing would be a pretty interesting development, and that would be sure to satisfy Mitsuki.

Besides, even if he died, Mitsuki planned to reset the world anyway, so Van would come right back to life. No matter how this particular fight ended, everything would end up the same.

"Oh, looks like you're really excited to see what I got. Sorry, I don't have anything that interesting." The ground in front of Kyuuzaburou started to glow. The hilt of a sword emerged from the light, lifting up to reveal a long blade. As the hilt reached Kyuuzaburou's waist, he grabbed it and pulled it out, revealing the sword to be as long as Kyuuzaburou's own height. "It's just a weapon that I thought matched this look. I don't have a scabbard or anything for it, so I have to carry it around like that, but it's nothing special." The weapon wasn't an object from the game. He must have brought it into Cavern Quest from the outside.

Now that his opponent had drawn his weapon, Van felt like testing how strong he was, so started his attack. He spawned a large boulder above Kyuuzaburou. The game's gravity dropped the boulder down. Kyuuzaburou noticed the sudden appearance of the object and hurriedly dodged out of the way.

"Whoa! What was that for?!"

"That's made from one of the basic materials used to make Cavern Quest. It's not indestructible, but it's tough enough that I wouldn't expect someone to be able to break it. I thought it would be a good way to test your edge."

"Come on, if something drops down from above, I'm obviously going to dodge out of the way. No one would think to stop it with a sword."

"I guess so. How about this, then?"

Glass walls appeared around Kyuuzaburou, closing him in. This was another one of the building blocks used to make Cavern Quest. The glass walls appeared at his sides and above him, making it impossible for him to leave without breaking through them. There were no openings in the glass either, so if he wasted time, he'd eventually suffocate.

"You really want to see how good this sword is, huh? I guess I don't have

any other way of fighting, so you'd see it sooner or later."

Kyuuzaburou lifted his sword into a high guard stance, then brought it down. Van presumed it was a rather powerful weapon. It was almost certainly capable of slicing through the materials he used to build Cavern Quest, and he might even be able to cut Van in two with the same stroke. But that would be all. Van's invincibility was linked to the existence of this world. As long as Cavern Quest existed, Van couldn't die. No amount of damage done to his physical body would matter. The only way to beat him was to destroy all of Cavern Quest simultaneously. And not just the channel they were in now either. He would have to destroy every channel all at once. So Van casually watched to see what Kyuuzaburou would do.

The sword moved slowly, breaking the glass ceiling above him. On top of that, a crack also ran through the ceiling of the audience chamber above them. As the sword continued down, it split the glass chamber apart, slicing a line clean through the entire castle across the sword's point. The tip passed over Van, splitting his body in two from the head down. When Kyuuzaburou's slash was finished, Van had been split in two from his head down to between his legs, but that was all.

The insides of Van's split body were solid black. Neither blood nor organs spilled out of him. Van was currently no more than an object in the game. He couldn't be killed just by being cut apart.

"So I guess you cut me in half. Is that all?" Van asked, still in two pieces.

"Yup, that's the end."

"You can surrender if you don't have anything else."

"Why would I surrender? I told you it's over."

Van lifted his hands to push the split halves of his body back together...or he tried to. His hands wouldn't move. He could feel the life draining out of him. He felt nauseous, dizzy, his consciousness starting to fade. It took him a moment to realize what was happening.

The world was sliding apart. It had been split in two. At first he thought it was because he couldn't focus his eyes, but it soon became clear that he was seeing properly.

"You said you're invincible as long as Cavern Quest exists, right? So I tried cutting the whole thing in half." He was telling the truth. Every single channel of Cavern Quest had been sliced in two. "But you're still alive. Did you lie to me?"

"Not a lie... I just didn't say the whole story. I'm the Game Master... I'm invincible...as long as a game world exists."

“Ah, I get it. So there are more games than just Cavern Quest.”

While the battle in the sky, Four Kingdoms, had been progressing, Van had been hard at work developing Cavern Quest. When Four Kingdoms had come to an end, he had turned his attention mainly to Cavern Quest, but naturally also began developing another game.

However, at present, ninety percent of the resources available to him were tied up in Cavern Quest. As such, the destruction of the game as a whole still did significant damage to him. With only a tenth of his strength remaining, Van was very much on death’s door.

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Chapter 20 — Interlude: Like No More than Ephemeral Dreams

Kyuuzaburou was a child of disaster. Thanks to the careless words of some fortune teller, that label had been put on him.

A child with red hair born on a certain day would destroy the world. The prophecy had been no more than a thoughtless remark, but because the fortune teller was close to the royal family, his words were taken very seriously. Though there was no basis for his prophecy, most of the red-haired children born on that day were killed. Kyuuzaburou himself had been spared thanks to his family being one of significant standing. His parents couldn't bring themselves to kill their newborn child due to the words of a vague prophecy. Instead, he had been confined to a corner of the family's estate.

In order to spare his life, he needed to live where no one else would see him. That was only possible due to the plentiful resources his family had access to. Ordinary people would not have been able to accomplish such a thing.

That was how Kyuuzaburou spent his childhood. Though he had to live his life in hiding and was kept out of the family register, his family took pity on him and blessed him with as much luxury as they could afford. After all, it was just some prophecy. After a while, the excitement would all die down. Or at least, that was what they'd thought, but the fortune teller would not rest.

"The child of disaster is alive," he declared. "He is living in hiding." He continued to bring such prophecies to the world.

Further constraints were forced on Kyuuzaburou. A huge bounty was placed on the child of disaster's head. Many other red-haired children were pulled out of hiding and executed. The search continued with fervor. Whole cities were turned upside down, each and every child of the right approximate age thoroughly examined. Only the richest families could protect their children.

At this point, Kyuuzaburou's parents started to grow weary of their child. If things were going to be this difficult, they felt they should have just killed him when he was born. It was inevitable that they would start to feel that way, and that they would come to the conclusion they should kill him before he was found out. They hesitated, though, and before they could make a decision,

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Kyuuzaburou was discovered. The people who had taken care of him in hiding had reported his existence.

So he was to be executed. He was tied up, brought to the executioner, and the axe was dropped...but before it reached him, a miracle occurred. A sword appeared from nowhere. Its blade sliced apart the executioner, the gallows, and the crowd of spectators. The ropes binding him were cut, allowing him to stand and take the hilt in his hands.

Filled with rage, he used the sword to slice apart everything around him. The people, the buildings, the ground, the sun, the sea, the world itself were all cut to pieces. And so, the world was destroyed, just as the fortune teller had predicted. Their only hope had been to kill him while he was still a helpless baby. In order to save the world, any amount of sacrifice would have been acceptable.

The end of the world brought death to every creature that lived on it. Naturally, that included Kyuuzaburou himself, so the tragedy should have ended there. But Kyuuzaburou didn't die—he suddenly found himself in a new wilderness. He had seen his world sliced in two and had never expected to survive. But since he was still alive, he needed to find a way to keep it that way.

Perhaps luckily, he found himself by a road leading to a nearby town. He didn't know where he was, but at the very least it seemed to be an inhabited place. As he headed towards the city, a group of armed men appeared. Having lived his entire life cooped up in a single house, he had no way of knowing it, but these were likely bandits. With nothing but the clothes on his back, he had nothing worth stealing. He tried to explain that to the bandits, but it didn't work.

They spoke an entirely different language, so they couldn't understand a word he said. The bandits sidled up to him. It was clear at a glance that he carried nothing of value, so perhaps they intended to sell him as a slave.

As Kyuuzaburou was seized with fear, the sword appeared once again, the same one that had appeared at the time of his execution. Taking it in hand, he swung. Once again, a world was destroyed. That one slash had cut the world in two. And once again, Kyuuzaburou found himself somewhere new.

This time, he was on the beach, close to another town. He visited the town, but once again he found himself unable to understand the language. A quarrel broke out, and once again he swung his blade. Naturally, another world was destroyed.

After a few more instances of this happening, Kyuuzaburou started to understand it. The sword would appear when he called it or show up on its own if he was in danger. It would cut apart everything, destroying the entire world

around him. After that, he would be sent to another world.

Every time he swung his blade, a world was destroyed, but that didn't mean he would let himself be killed. He tried to hold back, but no matter what he did, a single slash always brought the world to an end. So he became defiant. He had nothing but this sword to defend himself with. If others attacked him, it was their own fault.

Kyuuzaburou continued destroying worlds. Over and over, over and over. As the years passed, he slowly learned more skills to defend himself. A number of the worlds he visited had those who could sense the threat he posed. These people were a convenient source of knowledge, teaching him martial arts enough to defend himself barehanded.

Though he had originally possessed no magical talent, he learned some magic as well. Each world was governed by its own laws, so perhaps finding himself in a world where everyone could use magic changed him, or the breadth of knowledge he had acquired allowed him access. Eventually, he learned how to use these powers in other worlds. While the powers he obtained in any individual world weren't that impressive in their native lands, they could lead to incredible results in other worlds.

As he traveled between worlds, Kyuuzaburou learned how to live on his own. He became more tenacious, bolder, more brazen. He started to spend much more time in each world he visited. He had come across immortality in one of the worlds, so as long as no problems appeared, he could live in peace. However, when the many skills he had acquired were unable to handle a task, what would he do? There was nothing he could do but swing that sword again. Even if it meant the death of a world, he didn't want to die.

He did everything in his power to avoid using the sword, but it was inevitable —no matter how peaceful his life became, disaster would eventually strike. There was no way around it since it was simply an issue of probability. If one lived long enough, they would eventually run into a problem they couldn't solve.

At some point during his life, Kyuuzaburou lost all compassion for the worlds he visited. They felt like nothing more than ephemeral dreams. When one was gone, he would immediately appear in another. It got to the point where he would forget about each world shortly after leaving it. He felt guilty at first but soon grew used to it.

Eventually, he would start to grow tired of the world he was in and proactively leave. His destination was always up to chance. He loved finding strange new places and started seeing the whole thing as a pleasant adventure.

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After destroying and crossing plenty of worlds, he ended up at the one ruled by the Sages. He had no intention of doing anything there for a while. Unless something appeared to force his hand, he had no plan to end this world. Rather, he was interested in growing close to its people and experiencing what it had to offer.

Luckily, if one picked a good spot in this world and didn't stir up trouble, one could live in relative peace. If one lived in the territory of a reasonable Sage, one could live their life without difficulties. Occasionally, beings known as Aggressors would accost them, but the Sages dealt with those intruders.

However, Kyuuzaburou's peaceful days here had come to an abrupt end. One day, time had rewound. The people around him seemed to believe they had all been dreaming. They soon forgot about the old world, but Kyuuzaburou remembered. Among the many powers he had obtained, one was to keep a perfect record of everything he had encountered.

What had happened? During this time of confusion, disaster had rained down from the sky. A mysterious life form had invaded the world, trying to infect everything it could touch. In order to escape the invaders, Kyuuzaburou had joined Cavern Quest. It sounded like a much more interesting solution than using his sword. There, he learned that this whole situation had been brought about by the Great Sage and was told that if Yogiri Takatou was killed, everything would go back to normal.

Kyuuzaburou was more interested in the Great Sage than he was in Yogiri, though. If this Sage was capable of resetting the world like nothing had ever happened, he must have been many times stronger and would be much more entertaining. So Kyuuzaburou decided to play with this Great Sage.

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ACT 3

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Chapter 21 — The Destroyer of Worlds, Wielder of the World Slayer

Kyuuzaburou had a little bit of experience dealing with people who could create worlds. That experience had taught him that he could destroy artificial worlds like this one, though one slash wouldn't go any further than that. Basically, if a world existed on two levels, even if he sliced apart the inner level, it wouldn't impact the outer level at all. He could just swing again to destroy that outer level, so it wasn't much of an issue for him, but in this case that property was actually proving to be convenient. Kyuuzaburou had no desire to end this world right now.

Cavern Quest had been split apart. Though he had simply sliced it in two, it would never be able to recombine into one again. Once he had cut a world in two, the two halves would never rejoin, as if they repulsed each other. Once the two halves had separated to the point where anyone could see they were beyond saving, Kyuuzaburou found himself standing somewhere new. The castle he had been in before was gone, his surroundings now characterized by fallen trees.

He was in a destroyed forest, filled with some mysterious creatures squirming about, most likely that invasive species that had fallen from the sky. They looked rather different now, though, as if the plants themselves had been transformed into humanoid puppets. It seemed they hadn't been sitting idle while he was in Cavern Quest. The trees all lying on the ground must have been a result of their infection.

"I totally forgot about these guys."

Having destroyed Cavern Quest, it seemed he had been deposited on the surface. He figured the same must have happened to the other players. When a world was destroyed, if there was a habitable world immediately beside it, the inhabitants would be sent there.

"Hmm. It would be pretty lame if I had to use my sword against these things."

If that was how it was going to end, he should have just done this in the first place, rather than waste his time with Cavern Quest. However, given the way he was surrounded, he didn't have all that many options.

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“It’s too bad I don’t have any good skills for running away.”

The skills Kyuuzaburou had obtained from his travels all amounted to the basic abilities of the people from the worlds he visited. Convenient abilities like incinerating all the enemies in view or flying away were still beyond him.

“I was really hoping I’d get to face the Great Sage directly...”

Destroying the world of someone as brimming with confidence as the Great Sage would have been quite satisfying. He had hoped to do that, but he didn’t seem to have any way out other than using his sword now.

As Kyuuzaburou prepared to swing his blade, the aimlessly writhing creatures around him reacted with a jump. But they weren’t reacting to him. A loud roar came down from the sky. Looking up, he saw an enormous shape floating above him. It looked like some kind of star fort. Kyuuzaburou had seen the spherical vehicles before, or at least something similar, in one of the many worlds he had visited.

“It’s like a whole fleet...”

The sky was filled with star forts. He couldn’t quite tell how many there were, but the army seemed sufficient to destroy a planet or two. Cylindrical tubes poked out from the surface of the forts. They were most likely cannons, and they were all facing down.

“Huh?”

One of the star forts shook as its cannons fired, giving Kyuuzaburou no time to react. That was to be expected of a cosmic-scale weapon, he supposed. Luckily, they had targeted a place some distance away from him. Kyuuzaburou braced himself for the explosion he was sure would come, but the attack ended rather abruptly. The mysterious creatures and the ground around them had been cleanly erased.

One by one, the star forts fired their cannons, appearing to shoot indiscriminately at first, although it soon became clear that they were intentionally avoiding hitting Kyuuzaburou himself. Watching carefully, he could see that the cannons were firing some kind of projectile, which then sucked in its surroundings. He didn’t understand how it worked. It was safe to say he had never seen something similar in all the worlds he visited.

After a short while, the invasive creatures around him had been wiped out. They were supposedly immortal, capable of regenerating completely even if totally incinerated, but there was no sign of them coming back. All that was left was a haphazard, carved-up landscape.

“Was someone up there trying to save me?”

He looked up. One of the star forts shot a beam of light towards him, a figure emerging where the beam struck the ground. It was a man wearing a full bodysuit, one Kyuuzaburou had seen at the gathering before the start of the tournament.

“Hey, you’re one of the guys who was asking questions back then, right?” he asked. “About attacks that were too big in scale... Ah, so this is what you were worried about.”

At the time he had assumed the man was bragging or bluffing, but the scale of this attack was beyond anything he could have imagined. If all of those star forts attacked at once, there was no way any of the participants would have survived. Never mind the battle area in the clouds, the whole field zone would have been annihilated.

“I’m Saiz. Nice to meet you.”

“So? I’m grateful for the help, but you’re not here to fight me, are you?”

“What would be the point?” Saiz replied.

“That’s fair.” But why was he here, then? Kyuuzaburou couldn’t figure out his intentions.

“I want you to destroy the world.”

“I mean, I was probably going to eventually,” Kyuuzaburou said, “but I don’t like the idea of doing it because someone told me to.”

“I saved you, didn’t I?”

“And if you hadn’t, I would have destroyed the world to save myself. But true, I did find your display kind of interesting.” Kyuuzaburou had destroyed all kinds of worlds on his travels, but this was the first time someone had understood his power and then asked him to use it anyway.

“I’m not trying to tell you what to do,” Saiz said. “I just want you to make sure you destroy the Great Sage whenever you do get around to destroying the world.”

“Hmm. Whether I could cut him down myself or not, I was thinking of trying to meet him. But what about that Yogiri Takatou guy? You’re not interested in me killing him?”

“I’ve got nothing against him. I joined this game to get at the Great Sage.”

“I guess I was just kind of going with the flow.” For someone like Kyuuzaburou, who would appear in another world if something happened to the one he was currently in, such threats weren’t much of a concern to him. He had joined Cavern Quest because it looked like fun. He didn’t have much of an opinion on Yogiri Takatou. The Great Sage seemed like a much more interesting

person to him. “So, what exactly do you want me to do?”

“I think you can probably figure it out by looking up,” Saiz explained, “but I have the ability to travel between worlds.”

“Sure. I guess you’d have the technology for that.” Though there wasn’t much evidence to support the thought, he had assumed that was the case.

“So, this world being destroyed isn’t so much of a big deal to me. The world being reset is a different matter. I had already traveled somewhere else, but when the Great Sage reset the world, I was brought back. Basically, it looks like that’s going to happen again in the future, which is a problem for me.”

“I see. So the problem isn’t this world or Yogiri Takatou, it’s the Great Sage himself.”

“It’s a bit overly simplistic, but if I kill the Great Sage, then problem solved, right?” Saiz explained.

“Guess so. If that didn’t work, I wouldn’t know what to do next. So, you’re asking me to do it?”

“I’ve heard about you, Kyuuzaburou Suzuki. The destroyer of worlds, wielder of the World Slayer. A sword that can cut through anything, with which a single swing slices the world in two.”

“Ugh, is that what people are calling me? ‘World Slayer’? ‘Destroyer of worlds’?” His sword was just a sword to him. He hadn’t given it a special name. He had never given himself that kind of name either, so it was kind of embarrassing for others to be calling him that.

“The Great Sage’s abilities are an unknown quantity. I might be able to defeat him myself, but with your help, victory will be more certain.”

“Fine. I’ll cut him up for you.” Kyuuzaburou had no idea where the Great Sage was, nor did he have any way to travel to find him. If Saiz was willing to take him to meet the Great Sage, Kyuuzaburou was more than happy to oblige. “Take me there and consider it done.”

“No problem. I’ll count on you, then.”

One of the star forts fired a beam of light, enveloping the pair. The next moment, Kyuuzaburou was standing on the bridge, a room full of seats and technological gauges.

“Is this the inside of one of those star forts? I’m surprised there’s no one here.” Kyuuzaburou returned his sword to its resting place. He could swing the sword from anywhere at a moment’s notice. There wasn’t really any need to draw it every time, but it felt better to do it that way.

“They’re all controlled by AI,” Saiz explained. “The control room here is just

for decoration. I wanted to create a good atmosphere."

"Couldn't you have brought me here without wiping out all those weird things?" Kyuuzaburou asked. "The transport seemed pretty instant."

"Doing so without your permission would just be kidnapping, wouldn't it?"

"How conscientious of you."

"It comes with having this much power," Saiz replied. "If you wield it carelessly, everything goes to hell. I have to keep myself under control."

"Anyway, do you actually know where the Great Sage is?" Kyuuzaburou asked.

"Look over there," Saiz said, pointing to a large monitor. Something like a map of the world was displayed on it, with a number of glowing points. Those points likely referred to specific individuals. All of them seemed focused around one particular spot. He flicked a finger, causing the map to expand. "This is where everyone who was kicked out of Cavern Quest ended up. They're all pretty close together."

"Which is the Great Sage?"

"He's this blue one. Red is us, and yellow is everyone else."

The Great Sage seemed to be about a hundred kilometers away. If they were walking, it would be a mind-numbing distance, but with the star forts they might as well have been right beside each other.

"If he hides himself, all the sensors working together won't be able to find him. Now is our chance."

"Well, if you take me there, I'll get it done for you." Kyuuzaburou could hardly live a peaceful life in a world filled with those infectious creatures from the sky. He figured it was about time to finish this world off and move on, Great Sage or no.

Chapter 22 — One of Those Situations Where Some Occurrence during the Tournament Arc or the Exam Arc Throws Things into Chaos!

Things had started to get interesting, but Mitsuki figured it was about time to wrap it up. It had been fun to see so many unexpected developments, but with things getting this chaotic, it was starting to become clear how it would end.

Forced out of Cavern Quest, he found himself on the surface again. He was floating in the air, looking down at a completely changed world. Most of it had been overrun by the Seyla, making it more or less impossible for people to survive. The few who had stayed on the surface had almost all been infected already, and those who had just been ejected from Van's game would soon face the same fate.

Erasing the Seyla and rebuilding humanity was possible, but it seemed like it would be an exhausting amount of work. Beyond that, Mitsuki didn't like interfering so directly. Even if the starting parameters for a game were bad, he found no joy in fiddling with them to create an ideal world. He enjoyed watching people learn through trial and error in the midst of unfavorable conditions. That was where drama came from and what made it all worth watching.

Of course, there were some situations where no amount of struggle would be interesting to watch. Under certain circumstances, he was willing to reset things. This was one of those situations. At this point, there was no saving the world. There would be no one overturning the current status quo, no new drama to observe.

The only problem was Yogiri Takatou. As long as he was alive, those who he had killed couldn't be brought back to life. That wasn't a huge issue, but it was a shadow that would linger forever over Mitsuki's dreamworld. He much preferred things to be clean and tidy if he was going to reset.

"Alexia."

"You called, Lord Mitsuki?" The moment he spoke, Alexia was at his side.

“Things have gotten too crazy, so I’m going to end it now. Do you know where Yogiri Takatou is?” Mitsuki was functionally omnipotent, so finding out himself was well within his power, but he preferred to leave small things like this to his subordinates. It was easier for him that way.

“He is one hundred kilometers to the northwest, in the Meld Plains. Do you intend to meet with him face-to-face?”

“Yeah, I’d like to at least talk to him.” Mitsuki had guided developments to lure those who were participating in the Last Boss Quest to kill Yogiri. They might well still be trying to do so, making any action from Mitsuki unnecessary. He hadn’t been that worried about Yogiri, so that was what he had thought.

He was capable of instantly teleporting there, but a hundred kilometers didn’t seem far enough to justify it. As they started moving, the Meld Plains quickly came into view. Also known as the Crystal Plains, everything there had been transformed into crystal.

As Mitsuki made to touch down, he noticed that something had changed in the sky. As far as he could see, it was now filled with huge, spherical objects. They all seemed to be approaching him.

“What is that, a space fleet? Star forts?”

“It appears so,” Alexia replied.

If that was the case, they must have come from another world. This world didn’t have anything like space, so the concept of a spaceship or a space fortress was entirely nonexistent.

“What shall we do?” Alexia asked.

“If they’re coming for me, I’m curious to see why they’re making such a big show of it.”

The star forts began to transform. Holes opened in their sides, long cannon-like objects protruding from them. The cannons began to shine as they all pointed at Mitsuki.

It seemed like a weapon designed to unleash a stored amount of energy all at once. Even one of them seemed powerful enough to destroy an entire planet, so with this many, if they fired, there would be nothing of this world left.

“They don’t really look like weapons you’d use inside the atmosphere of a planet, do they?”

“This world does not really possess an atmosphere, though,” Alexia pointed out.

“I’ve never been hit by something like this before. Maybe I’ll see what they’ve got.”

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“Please do not. I cannot imagine it harming you, but I would be most displeased to see it happen regardless.”

Despite Alexia’s request, Mitsuki couldn’t suppress his curiosity.

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“What the heck is going on?!” Tomochika shouted, voicing a confusion very similar to Yogiri’s.

They had been waiting in the Antechamber Area after the fourth round had finished when a line had suddenly cut through space. Yogiri hadn’t felt any danger from it, but in the next moment he found the scenery around them had completely changed. The sudden change had confused him, but once he had a chance to calm down and look around, he recognized this place.

The grass, the trees, even the buildings of what looked like some sort of settlement all seemed to be made of crystal. He remembered passing through this place before—the Meld Plains, also known as the Crystal Plains. After their trial in the tower, they had passed through here on their way to the capital.

The difference was that now the netlike thing hanging in the sky had disappeared, to be replaced by creatures that looked like people woven together out of some kind of ivy wandering the plains.

“Is that the Seyla?”

When the Seyla had first fallen from the sky, it had mostly been in the form of plants, so it had moved quite slowly. Now, however, it was much more monsterlike, and was clearly quite mobile. Looking closely, it almost seemed to be taking the form of a human girl.

Yogiri had heard that Seyla was the younger sister of Sage Lain. A divine relic had given her immortality, but Yogiri didn’t know the details beyond that. When he had encountered the Seyla on the floating continent, it had taken the form of a virus that infected all living things it came into contact with.

Back then, things infected by the Seyla had retained their original shape and personality, but here it was attacking anything that moved on sight. Even now it was chasing something. After observing for a time, they could see the Seyla was chasing a crystalline dog.

“Wait, didn’t we see that dog the last time we were here?” Tomochika said.

Though there were creatures living here, the Meld Plains had been a melancholy place on their last visit. It seemed much more lively now with the countless pieces of Seyla writhing around. Each piece seemed to have a human

face, all identical. Maybe that was how Seyla had looked when she was alive.

"Wait, is it heading towards us?!" Tomochika exclaimed.

The dog was running in their direction, bringing the Seyla along with it. The expressions on the Seyla's faces clearly showed they were hunting prey. But rather than triumphant and victorious, they were twisted with anguish.

I guess she did ask me to kill Seyla, Yogiri thought to himself. Risley had asked him to do so, having inherited Lain's will. He had replied that he couldn't do so without knowing why, to which she said he would know why when he met her.

Yogiri could sort of understand now. The Seyla didn't act like this because it wanted to. Tormented by what could only be called a curse of immortality, it continued to spread with no understanding of its situation. If it could die, that was no doubt what it would ask for. Maybe that was just Yogiri making assumptions, but he could finally agree with Lain's point of view.

Yogiri used his power. The Seyla chasing the crystalline dog toppled, collapsing around them and all over the world.

"Wait, didn't you say dealing with the Seyla was going to be difficult?" Tomochika asked.

"I said killing the Seyla separate from the people it infected would be difficult. I didn't bother to distinguish between them just now. I killed them all together."

It does not appear the infected possessed any hints of their former selves, Mokomoko observed. *I cannot imagine there was much one could do for them, even were they to be cured.*

"Okay! So we just killed them because they attacked us! No problem, then!" Maybe out of concern for Yogiri, Tomochika seemed to force herself to agree.

"We're out of immediate danger, but now what do we do? Oh, we've been to that station before, right?"

Looking around, they saw a familiar structure. Yogiri remembered the army of some foreign nation having attacked it.

"Ah! That means we're pretty close to the capital of Manii, aren't we?"

"True. But *that* means we're back on the surface. I wonder why?"

Is that not exactly what we wished for? That was why we were attempting to beat the game, Mokomoko pointed out.

"I'm curious about why we got moved, though."

"Not like we'll figure it out just by thinking about it," Tomochika said.

It is like one of those situations where some occurrence during the

tournament arc or the exam arc throws things into chaos! her guardian spirit replied.

"That's annoyingly vague, but I guess we have no choice but to act as if Cavern Quest is over." The current situation was entirely beyond his understanding, but Yogiri had no desire to dive back into Cavern Quest. Their only option was to keep moving forward.

"If we're going anywhere, I guess we should start with the capital, huh?" Tomochika said. "There's nothing here but cold."

"It's still pretty far from us...and I guess there won't be any trains running?"

"Should we at least check?" Tomochika asked.

"I guess it's better than standing around here doing nothing—"

As he made to start walking, a huge roar shook the air. The vibration caused the crystallized trees around them to shake to the point of cracking and breaking. Yogiri looked up to see countless huge spheres filling the sky.

"What are those, star forts?!" Tomochika exclaimed.

We saw something similar before the reset. Are these perhaps their allies? Mokomoko suggested, recalling the streamlined spaceships they had encountered near the ruins in the elven forest. Those ships had shown a clear killing intent aimed at Yogiri, so he had wiped them out, but they had never figured out who they were or what their attackers wanted.

"They don't seem to be trying to kill us," Yogiri said.

Even so, they couldn't casually start walking to the train station now. As they watched, the star forts began to shine. A huge cannon emerged from each one, light condensing at the tip of their barrels.

"What is that, some kind of wave cannon?! And is that Alexia and the Great Sage over there?!"

"Your eyes are still as good as ever," Yogiri commented.

Impressed she could see anything, he followed her gaze but saw nothing but a couple of specks in the distance, though it did seem the cannons were aimed at them.

"What on earth is going on here?!" Tomochika cried.

It was clear the star forts were going for the Great Sage. Their killing intent was very obviously aimed in that direction, but the damage from the cannons was also clearly overlapping Yogiri and Tomochika's location. To Yogiri's eyes, the whole world had grown dark.

"It doesn't seem like they care about us either way, but I don't want to get wrapped up in this..."

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Yogiri made the decision to act around the same time his power activated automatically.

Chapter 23 — Anything I Can’t Imagine Can’t Exist in This World

In the end, the star forts never fired their cannons. The weapons lost their light, and as one, the armada fell from the sky. That was, of course, an issue for those standing inside them.

“Hey, Saiz! What happened?!”

On the bridge of one of the star forts, Kyuuzaburou yelled at Saiz, who had collapsed to the floor. Just a minute earlier, he had been bragging that his Ultimate Space Cannons were capable of wiping out a galactic supercluster, but now he was silent and motionless. The large monitor in the room displayed the numerous star forts falling from the sky.

“No way... Did the Great Sage do this?”

Saiz dying was a result of his own actions, so Kyuuzaburou wasn’t especially bothered. However, the result would be him falling from the sky to his death.

“Well, this is a problem. Should I just use my sword?”

But the sword was his last resort. Kyuuzaburou ran to the closest console. It was covered in buttons and levers with no clear purpose. He randomly started hitting and pulling them. The attack had disabled the cannons, but the monitor was still functioning, so it wasn’t like the star fort was completely dead. Kyuuzaburou was hoping he might find something like an emergency escape function. Apparently he was right, as when he pushed a button on a distant part of the console, a beam of light enveloped his body. The next moment, he was standing on the ground. Looking up, he could see he had been deposited immediately below the falling star fort.

“Oh, come on. How is this supposed to be safe?”

He had hoped to appear a bit farther away, but at least he was outside. The land around him seemed to be a grassland that had crystallized.

“Didn’t I hear about somewhere that had turned to crystal before?”

In any other situation, he might have been able to appreciate the haunting beauty of the landscape, but he didn’t have the time for that now.

“Why is there suddenly a samurai here?!”

Hearing a woman’s voice, Kyuuzaburou turned around to see Yogiri Takatou

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and his partner standing behind him.

"Yo. I don't think it matters at this point, but I'm not after you. It's probably a coincidence that we're both here. Not that I know."

"Kind of hard to trust anything you say when you're that vague!" the girl shouted back.

"I don't really care if you believe me; I don't have time to talk."

Saiz's death and the falling star forts must have been caused by the Great Sage. If that was the case, he must have known that Kyuuzaburou had escaped and that he was here now. The Great Sage would likely show up in pursuit of him.

Sure enough, the Great Sage arrived just as Kyuuzaburou drew his sword. The mask the Great Sage had been wearing before was gone, and a woman had followed him down.

"Wait, are there three of you now?" the Great Sage remarked.

Kyuuzaburou clicked his tongue. "So you're actually just after Yogiri Takatou?"

This had worked out just fine for him. If he had emerged too far from the Great Sage, he would have had to destroy the world without the Sage present. But if he was going to destroy the world anyway, he preferred to do it in front of the Great Sage. He was looking forward to seeing the look on the face of a man who had styled himself as a god while his world fell apart.

"Ah! You're one of the players in the Last Boss Quest, aren't you? Did you come here looking for Yogiri Takatou? In that case, you two go ahead; I'll wait."

"I can't say I really care about him. Either way, I'm putting an end to this world, so it probably makes more sense for me to take you on."

No matter who he aimed his sword at, one slash would bring an end to the world. It didn't make much difference who he targeted, so he would rather attack someone who would show more surprise.

"Really? It doesn't matter to me, I guess," the Great Sage replied.

"Do you know what this is?" Kyuuzaburou asked, lifting up his sword.

"A katana, right? It's not particularly better at cutting than any other sword, but for some reason they're treated as special in this world."

"You said it. But this sword alone is uniquely sharp. I can't say there's anything it's ever been unable to cut. It's honestly so good at it, it ends up cutting things I didn't want to."

"I see. So you think it'll be able to cut me too?"

"Lord Mitsuki! That man is telling the truth!" The woman beside the Great

Sage began to panic. “That sword is an exception in the Ultimate Ensemble World!”

“So am I, right?”

“True, but...”

“What, are you scared? If you dodge, you lose,” Kyuuzaburou said. Dodging the slash would mean nothing. The world would still be split in two and destroyed. But he wanted to see the Great Sage’s shock when he was cut in two, so he tried to provoke him anyway.

“Sure. I’ll take your challenge,” the Great Sage replied with a bright smile. Kyuuzaburou felt like he would lose his trust in people if the Great Sage dodged it now.

He brought his sword up to rest on his shoulder. After dabbling in all sorts of schools of swordsmanship, this was a style he had developed on his own. That said, there wasn’t much actual technique to it. He was just doing what he thought looked kind of cool.

“All right, let’s do this.” Kyuuzaburou swung the sword in a wide sweep from right to left. It was a huge swing, though still far too distant to actually reach its target. He didn’t know at exactly what point the sword’s special properties began to apply, but as the tip passed by his own side, it started to slice through space itself.

The world itself was coming apart. The woman jumped in front of the blade as if to protect the Great Sage, stretching out her hands to create a barrier. But there was no way a barrier like that would save them. The blade was already slicing through space itself and therefore had no issue passing through the barrier and the woman herself. Her face twisted in shock. She had known full well what the sword was, but it seemed she still hadn’t fully believed in its power before seeing it for herself.

The Great Sage lifted his left hand to intercept the sword, no doubt intending to block it. But what was attacking him wasn’t just a sword blade; it was a phenomenon splitting apart space itself. There was no way to defend against it, no one who had ever come close. As huge of a deal it was for this particular world, this was all exactly what Kyuuzaburou had expected, and he had no reason to believe it would be any different this time.

So when the spatial tear stopped at the Great Sage’s hand, Kyuuzaburou was incredibly surprised. He had long since lost track of how long he had lived, how many worlds he had destroyed. Destroying worlds was as natural as breathing to him. He never imagined someone would be able to defend against him.

“Very nice. You look like you don’t believe your eyes. I imagine you were hoping to see that look on my face, but I enjoy it quite a bit too. I guess I shouldn’t just leave things like this hanging around, though.”

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The tear in space began to mend. Even the woman who had been sliced in two returned to normal. It was like time was rewinding just for everything the sword had touched.

“What the...hell... How did you do that?!”

“It’s pretty simple. This world is a dream that I’m seeing. You and your sword are nothing more than parts of my imagination. So even if it looks like you’re destroying the world on the surface, you can’t actually get to the core of it. It would be weird if you, no more than a character in my dream, could destroy the dream itself, right?”

“There’s no way that’s true. How many worlds do you think I’ve traveled through? Ten thousand doesn’t even come close. A hundred million might be getting there. Are you telling me those were all a dream?! There’s no way that’s possible!”

Though he had entirely forgotten most of them, he knew full well that he had experienced countless worlds. Even the ones he remembered defied counting. He couldn’t believe all of that had been part of the Great Sage’s dream.

“If you’ve experienced so many worlds, you must know about the five-minute world theory, right?” the Great Sage said.

“Ha ha ha... You can’t argue against a theory like that, I guess.” The theory that the world had suddenly popped into existence five minutes prior was one that was impossible to refute. Even if one appealed to memories prior to the point of the world’s origin, the theory could easily posit that those memories had come into existence at the same time.

“All of your memories and experiences are part of my dream.”

“Like hell they are! You expect me to believe you *made* me?!”

“Taken to the extreme you could say that, but I didn’t really have any direct influence on you. I let this whole world develop randomly. The only influence I had was setting up the initial options for the random number generator. Your life is still yours. You appearing before me here today is no more than a coincidence. I didn’t plan it out in the least.”

Kyuuzaburou wanted to believe it was all a lie, all nonsense. If he believed the Great Sage’s words, there was no chance of ever beating him. Everything would rest in the palm of his hand.

But the moment Kyuuzaburou’s sword had been stopped—that weapon he had so much faith in, whose power was so immense as to be like a curse—he couldn’t help but find the Great Sage’s words to be believable.

So did that mean he needed to accept he was just a fleeting, transient

existence himself? There was no way he could do that. Once he accepted that fact, his whole sense of being would be shaken. His entire identity would collapse. No matter what he witnessed, he couldn't accept that fact.

"Th-That's right! You mentioned an exception earlier, didn't you?! That means my power works in every world! An exception is something that operates the same, no matter how different the laws of the individual world are!"

"Yeah. But even if you're right about that, it doesn't give you any proof that you aren't a part of my dream."

No matter what excuses Kyuuzaburou tried to make, the fact was that his attack had failed. If he wanted to prove the Great Sage to be a liar, he needed to do so with actions.

Kyuuzaburou roared, rushing forward, grasping for the one small ray of hope he could still see. If the blade of his sword made physical contact, it might just work. His only option was to cling to that vague, uncertain notion. The woman beside him started to move, but the Great Sage stopped her. Kyuuzaburou brought his sword down on him with a downward slash aimed at his forehead. The Great Sage made no effort to dodge or to defend himself. The blade struck...and shattered. The top half of the sword snapped off and flew away, and at the same time, Kyuuzaburou's heart broke.

"Sorry. I would have liked to get cut in two for you, but I just can't imagine that happening. And anything I can't imagine can't exist in this world."

Kyuuzaburou fell to his knees. He knew now that he had no chance at winning.

"Is that all? I won't kill you or anything, so you're free to do what you like." Having lost all interest in Kyuuzaburou, the Great Sage turned his attention to Yogiri.

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Chapter 24 — I’m Not So Twisted as to Watch the Whole Thing

“Now then, with all that’s happened, I think I’m going to have to kill you.” After finishing his exchange with the samurai-like man, the Great Sage turned to Yogiri.

“You should have done that from the start,” Yogiri said. “I don’t know why you dragged it out so much.” They had already met at the top of the pyramid in Cavern Quest. If he was going to kill Yogiri anyway, he should have just done it then. That would have saved Yogiri a lot of trouble fighting and killing people. He felt like he had gone through a lot of needless effort.

“I thought it would be more interesting this way. A lot of unexpected things happened thanks to all this, so I’ve been enjoying it. But it’s about time I finished things. The future looks pretty boring from here.”

“‘Interesting’ this, ‘boring’ that. Are you that starved for entertainment?” Yogiri was starting to feel fed up. He couldn’t help his frustration that all of this was being done just for the sake of killing time.

“Yeah, I’m usually pretty bored. So could you go ahead and use your power for me? You like the same thing, right? You enjoy seeing the faces of people who are overly confident in themselves when they realize they’re actually powerless, right?”

“Not especially. And even if my power didn’t work on you, I wouldn’t make some funny face for you.” If his power didn’t affect the Great Sage, that would be all there was to it. Yogiri’s ability hadn’t made him arrogant. As far as he knew, it worked on everything he had encountered so far, but he wouldn’t be surprised if there were exceptions. In a sense, he took his power for granted, but he didn’t understand how it worked in the least. He didn’t know enough about it to think it strange that it might fail. “Let me ask first, just in case, but can you get us back to our home world?”

“I probably could, but then the people you killed would never come back to life,” the Great Sage replied.

“If this is all your dream, why can’t you manage it?” Yogiri didn’t consider himself to be a part of the Great Sage’s dream, but when he had been told that

this was, in fact, a dreamworld, there hadn't been much he could say to argue. As long as he still had his own free will, there wasn't a lot to complain about either.

"When you came, a rule was placed on this world that anyone you kill can't be brought back to life. I need to get rid of that rule, which is why you have to die."

"Fine. But if you try to kill me, I'll resist."

"But how am I going to do it? Just plain old instant death is no fun." The Great Sage lifted his right hand, where a small light began to glow.

That looks incredibly dangerous! Mokomoko exclaimed.

"It does, doesn't it?" As someone with no experience with magic, there was no way Yogiri could gauge the power of a spell just by looking at it. But the intense, frenzied pressure of the light he was seeing was clear to everyone.

"Let's call it an erasure bolt," the Great Sage said. "If it hits you, it deletes your entire past, present, and future. I guess in really simple terms, it'll make it so that I totally forget you ever existed."

"So because it's your dream, if you forget someone exists, they disappear?"

"Exactly. I don't really need to use something this extreme, but I thought I'd make it a bit of a show. It only moves as fast as I can throw it, so if you try hard enough, you should be able to dodge it. Okay, let's start."

"Please wait!" As the Great Sage made to throw the ball of light, Alexia stopped him.

"What's wrong?"

"I investigated the boy, just to be safe," Alexia explained, "and he is no more than an ordinary teenager. Any mundane method of taking his life should be sufficient. But that in and of itself is strange. He has killed all kinds of people. He has even created a situation where someone as powerful as you cannot bring the dead back to life! So I decided he merited a deeper investigation!" Alexia was clearly in a panic. Yogiri didn't care about her much, but her desperation was enough to draw his attention.

"But I couldn't find out anything. It's too strange! This cannot be the case! As I attempt to investigate further, my will to investigate disappears! I am forced to turn my eyes away! There must be something at work on me, some kind of protection for him! I have given everything I have to you, Lord Mitsuki. I gave you all of my power, all of my being, leaving me only a hollow shell of what I once was. But even so, there is still something left in me! Something fundamental to my being, something I cannot separate from myself!"

“I see,” Mitsuki replied. “So what do you think I should do?”

“Let us return this boy to his home world! Leave the dead as they are and restart the world without them! There is no need for us to expose ourselves to this kind of danger!”

“Hmm. Coming from you, of all people, that is pretty persuasive. But that doesn’t change that this is my world. There’s no way a character in my dream can kill me. Even if he could, that would just mean the world was destroyed, right?”

The Great Sage’s words made Yogiri realize something. If this world was actually a dream the Great Sage was having, what would happen to it if Yogiri used his power to kill him? Normally, one would expect the whole thing to disappear, which meant Yogiri would be killed too. That would be entirely pointless.

“Please!”

“Stop getting in the way,” the Great Sage replied, making Alexia go stiff. Whatever Alexia had been trying to do, the Great Sage had stopped her. It was like time had frozen for her alone. “Sorry. Things have started looking pretty sloppy, haven’t they?”

“It’s fine,” Yogiri replied. “This’ll be over pretty fast anyway.”

What would happen if he killed the Great Sage? How much of an impact would that have on the world? Yogiri believed he was telling the truth, and killing the Great Sage would lead to the world being destroyed. So he released the seal on his powers. He opened the second gate, and beyond it the third gate, unleashing the full extent of his own abilities. There was now nothing limiting him, returning him to his natural state.

Killing the Great Sage would destroy the world. If Mitsuki and this world were so closely linked, even Yogiri’s second level wouldn’t be enough to deal with him.

“This time I’m attacking for real, okay?” The Great Sage threw the ball of light like he was playing a game of catch.

Yogiri activated his power.

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Mitsuki was in the dark.

Though he was utterly confused, he was far from worried. For someone omnipotent, as he was, there was no such thing as fear. He could enjoy anything

that happened to him.

"Did he do something to me?"

He tried to recall the previous events. He had thrown the erasure bolt, but Yogiri had made no attempt to avoid it. If he had, the attack would have followed him anyway, but Mitsuki hadn't bothered explaining that. He didn't remember seeing the attack land, so something must have happened before it made contact.

"He must have done something. But I really have no idea what."

"Let me tell you."

Mitsuki turned around at the sound of a person's voice. Standing within the darkness was a young man. He seemed a little familiar. He was one of the gods that had ruled over this world before Mitsuki had arrived and turned it into his own dream.

"You were one of the gods here before Malnarilna, right?"

"That's right. And I'm the current god too. After all that's happened, I've taken up the name Kouryu, so please call me that."

"Kouryu, is it? Why are you here?"

"Because things have finally gone the way I was hoping. I wanted to see you off, just to put the icing on the cake."

Mitsuki figured Kouryu was talking about taking back the Heavenly Throne after Malnarilna's death. Once Mitsuki reset the world, all that would be undone again, but Kouryu should have known that. If he wanted to bask in the glory he had achieved while he still had the chance, Mitsuki was happy to let him do so. Nothing Kouryu was saying bothered him in the least.

"So, what exactly happened?" Mitsuki asked.

"You should be able to figure that much out on your own, shouldn't you?"

"I like to hear things from other people, though." If he decided he wanted to know something, he could learn anything in the world instantly, but there was no fun in that. He preferred to learn things by conversing with others, no matter how trivial those things were. It was much more fun that way.

"Then I guess I'll talk with you for a bit. The answer is actually quite simple. You lost to Yogiri Takatou. Your attack never reached him."

"Really? That's interesting! I guess it was worth meeting him face-to-face after all! I never expected something like this!"

"You seem pretty laid-back for having lost," Kouryu remarked.

"I mean, it's all a dream anyway. I can reset the game whenever I want. There's no point getting upset because my character in the game died, is there?"

After a short silence, Kouryu burst out laughing, barely able to stay standing through the fit of hysterics. “A game! It’s all a game, is it?! I guess it kind of looks that way! Yeah, I get it.”

“Did I say something strange? You realize I’m not dead, right?” That was obvious. The fact that he could still think meant he couldn’t be dead.

“Yeah, you’re right. You aren’t dead. Yogiri Takatou didn’t kill you. That’s why he had to use his full power.”

“So what?” Mitsuki was getting a little bit irritated with the way Kouryu was dodging around what he was really trying to say, dropping hints but never telling the truth outright.

“If you died, the world would end. If you hadn’t told him that, maybe things wouldn’t have turned out this way. Well, actually, I’m not sure about that either. Yogiri Takatou is one of the regulating forces in the Ensemble World, so it would be a much bigger problem if he died.”

“Can you just come out with it?”

“You said you prefer hearing things from other people, right? If you’re tired of listening to me, just figure it out for yourself. This is your world. You’re omnipotent. Everything goes the way you want it to, right?”

He *was* right. Mitsuki didn’t know why Kouryu was here, but he had no need to rely on some minor god to figure anything out.

“Alexia!” the Great Sage called out, his voice swallowed by the all encompassing darkness. Alexia did not appear. There was no response. She was a woman whose greatest joy in life was answering the Great Sage’s every desire, who always appeared in the blink of an eye to hear his every word, but she didn’t even respond.

“Come on, don’t you remember? You froze her in time. There’s no way she can reply to you!”

“Alexia, you have my permission to move again!” Accepting that he had made a foolish mistake, he called out to her again, but there was still no answer.

“Hmm. You didn’t really treat her very nicely back there,” Kouryu suggested. “Maybe she’s off sulking somewhere?”

“That’s impossible! Alexia loves me! She would do anything for me, any time!” Mitsuki’s irritation was starting to blossom into anger.

“Why don’t you try doing something for yourself for once?” Kouryu suggested. “You’re always leaving things to other people because you just can’t be bothered, aren’t you?”

Alexia wasn’t replying. That was a fact. So Mitsuki relented, investigating

the situation for himself.

“What’s wrong?” Kouryu asked. “Just look it up yourself. You’re basically omniscient, right?” Kouryu was making a poor attempt at hiding his mockery, inflaming Mitsuki’s frustration.

But he wasn’t really sure where to start investigating. Even if he called himself omniscient, he couldn’t know every fact at every time. Maybe if he tried, he actually could, but the effort would be exhausting. The trick was to learn only the information you were immediately curious about, to focus on the fact you wanted to learn alone. Normally, doing so would cause the information he was looking for to float up in the back of his mind, but now nothing was happening.

“What’s going on?!” Mitsuki exclaimed.

“Oh, is something the matter? You can’t figure it out?”

“Shut up!” he reflexively attempted to erase Kouryu, a rather direct use of his power, one that he hadn’t used in quite a while.

But Kouryu didn’t disappear. That smirk was still directed straight at him. “As an order from the Great Sage himself, I’d really like to obey it, but for some reason, I can’t. I wonder why that is?”

Mitsuki had no desire to spend another moment with some lowly god from the previous era. He decided to go back home. Everything was just his imagination. Whatever he thought became reality. The moment he thought to return home, he should have appeared there. And yet, he was still standing in this empty void.

“Why?!” he shouted. He tried to make some light, to return to the Meld Plains he had just come from, to call his friends. None of it worked. The world around him remained as it was, steady and unrelenting darkness.

“Please...just tell me. *What* is going on?” Mitsuki began to beg. He had finally understood that there was nothing he could do.

“Since you’re asking so nicely, I guess I have to tell you,” Kouryu replied. “Yogiri Takatou killed the relationship between you and the world.”

“What?” Mitsuki didn’t understand what that meant. He could understand the idea of killing a living thing. Even the idea of killing a phenomenon like gravity made sense, in a vague sort of way. But what did it mean to kill a relationship?

“If the world is a dream someone is seeing, how do you avoid that person’s influence?” Kouryu asked. “By cutting them off from the dream. Make it so that they can’t influence the dreamworld. At least, that must have been Yogiri’s conclusion.”

“What do you mean?”

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“You said this was like a game before, right? If we stick to that example, it’s like Yogiri broke your controller. Basically, you can’t do anything anymore.”

Understanding was slowly dawning on him. Mitsuki was starting to realize what had happened. And as that understanding set in, fear was not far behind.

“Okay then, I think I’ve explained enough to you, so I’m going to be on my way. I’m sure you’re about to break down into all kinds of terror and confusion, but I’m not so twisted as to watch the whole thing.” Kouryu disappeared, leaving Mitsuki alone in the darkness.

The Great Sage tried to die, but he couldn’t. Right now, he didn’t even have a physical form. He was nothing more than a disembodied consciousness, separated from reality. He had become only the dreamer, merely a tool that was necessary to sustain the world.

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Chapter 25 — But Wait, What Was All Our Hard Work for, Then?

Mitsuki collapsed, his erasure bolt winking out before it reached Yogiri. His friend Alexia was still frozen.

“So, uh...is it over?” Tomochika asked tentatively, looking around.

“Looks like it. The world didn’t end, so I guess this is good.”

“What was with this guy, anyway?” she asked, looking down at the Great Sage. He had said the world was a dream he was seeing, but she didn’t understand what that meant.

This world has been full of nothing but people like him, Mokomoko commented.

That was true. Tomochika could list off all kinds of arrogant people who had popped up out of nowhere and died immediately.

“So...beating him is cool and all, but what do we do now?”

They had completed their immediate objective of returning to the surface, but she had no idea how to go about finding a way home from there. A number of people they knew might be willing to help, like the goddess Luu, the Sage Sion, or the fallen god Kouryu, but she had no idea how to find any of them.

“I’d appreciate it if you went home as soon as possible, actually.” As Tomochika went down the list, one of those very people called out to them. The boy named Kouryu was now standing beside them.

“Yeah, how are we going to do that, though?” Yogiri replied. “We’ve been trying to find a way to go home from the start.”

“I’ll do it. I can guarantee you a safe return, one hundred percent. And I’d like to ask that you never come back here either.”

“Not like we came here the first time because we wanted to!” Tomochika retorted.

“You aren’t starting to get a little attached to this place, are you?” Kouryu asked.

“Not at all,” Yogiri replied.

“Of course not!” Tomochika shouted at the same time, a bit of anger starting to tinge her voice. She didn’t want to spend a single second more here than she

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had to.

“Okay, then let’s get the finishing touches squared away.” Kouryu stepped over to Alexia and touched her. As he did, she started moving again.

“You...” She immediately glared at him.

“Hey, please don’t attack me or anything. I’m not all that strong.”

However, she realized immediately she had no time to waste on Kouryu, instead running to the fallen Sage’s side. “Lord Mitsuki!”

“Yeah, it’s exactly what it looks like. The Great Sage Mitsuki is asleep. He’ll stay asleep forever, existing only to keep dreaming of this world,” Kouryu explained.

“Huh? He’s not dead?” Tomochika asked, surprised. She had assumed that Yogiri had killed him, but now that she looked closer, he did seem to be breathing.

“But that’s good for you, right?” Kouryu said. “Now he’ll never look at another woman. From now on, he’ll be all yours, for the rest of time.”

Though she panicked at first, it seemed Kouryu’s words were slowly making their way through to Alexia, as she began regaining her composure.

“So there’s no problem here at all, right? I may be the god of this world, but I can run it without messing with the Sages. If you went off to find some place no one would ever bother you, you should be able to enjoy your happy life alone with him.”

“Very well. I shall accept your suggestion. Then we agree not to interfere with each other in any capacity, yes?”

“Yeah. It’s a win for both of us.”

Alexia gently lifted Mitsuki off the ground before vanishing.

“That’s one big problem out of the way, though with Luu being erased, Alexia was the only big problem left.”

“Luu was erased?!” Tomochika cried.

“She lost a fight to the Demon Lord Gorbagion. But, well, she’s still a god. The concept of ‘death’ doesn’t really apply to her, so you don’t need to worry. She’ll pop up again somewhere sooner or later.”

“I don’t know. That sounds too easy...” But trying to understand how gods worked from a human perspective was a losing battle from the outset, Tomochika told herself, so maybe all she could do was accept what Kouryu told her.

“So, was the Great Sage the one who turned her into Philosopher’s Stones?” Yogiri asked.

“Yeah. Basically, the whole situation in this world was caused by three goddesses fighting over him. After the painfully long battle, it ended with Alexia winning and the other two being sealed away.”

It sounded to Tomochika like an event happening on an unbelievable scale, yet Kouryu made it sound like an everyday occurrence.

“If the Sages aren’t going to interfere with the world anymore, what’ll happen with the Aggressors?” she asked. It may have not mattered much to her personally if they were going to make it back home, but she couldn’t help but be curious. The Sages had been responsible for fighting off the Aggressors, so she was worried what would happen without them around.

“Ah. Most of the Aggressors were here looking for Luu and the UEG, so with them gone, there probably won’t be any more. I guess there’s still the possibility of invasions from other worlds, but that’s a different issue.”

“So basically...everything was the Great Sage’s fault! Got it!” Tomochika concluded.

“Anyway, strike while the iron’s hot, as they say.”

As Kouryu spoke, the world around them changed. The ground beneath them turned into a bluish-black material, with a wall of the same stuff standing in front of them. Looking up, the wall seemed to stretch on forever. There were lights stuck to it here and there, but no sign of a ceiling. Looking to the right and left, the wall seemed to be curved. Looking backwards, they found the ground they were standing quickly came to an abrupt end, nothing but empty blackness beyond it. It was like they were standing on the inside of a huge cylinder, the ground only lining its interior wall.

“I guess I’m kind of used to being teleported all over the place by now, but where exactly are we?” Tomochika asked with a sigh. After all she had been through, the only thing that came to mind was “oh, this again.”

“This is the Celestial Axis. It connects Celestial Foundations to each other. By going through here, you can visit all sorts of worlds. There are other worlds not connected by this Axis, but we should be able to reach yours, no problem.”

“It was this easy the whole time?!”

“Not everyone can use this place,” Kouryu explained. “It’s managed by the gods, so I couldn’t use it until I had my authority back.”

“Huh? So you’re saying any time after we beat Malnarilna, you could have sent us back?!” Tomochika cried.

“Yes, but with the Great Sage around, he could have brought you back any time the mood struck him, so beating him was necessary too.”

“I feel like we’ve been pretty thoroughly used...” Tomochika said, giving Kouryu a suspicious look.

“You see that sphere there, right? That’s how you move around the Axis. I already put in the instructions for it to take you home, so please get going.”

“Jeez, how rude do you need to be?!”

Kouryu pointed to a spherical object that had appeared on the edge of the platform. It was about ten meters across, made of what looked like metal, and had a door on the outside.

“This will really take us home?” Yogiri asked, doubtful.

“Of course. I am well aware of how dangerous you are. I’m not plotting anything at this point. I honestly want to get you back home and keep you from ever coming back here.”

“Maybe it’s not our place to say this,” Tomochika replied, “but this world seems to be in pretty rough shape. Are things going to be okay?”

“There are still some survivors out there, so we’ll find a way. I’m not planning on holding you responsible or anything. Now come on, get going!”

“You really are just shooing us away, aren’t you?! But wait, what was all our hard work for, then?”

“Your hard work ended up bringing you here, didn’t it?”

“Really? I find it hard to accept that...”

But in the end, it seemed they had indeed needed to deal with the Great Sage, and it had taken quite a bit of growth for them to get that done. In some ways, it felt they had just been drifting along with the current, and there had probably been an easier way for them to get home, but there was no point worrying about it now.

“If we can get back home, I don’t think we need to worry about the details,” Yogiri decided.

“Ah! But are we going back in these clothes?! Or does that count as a detail we don’t need to worry about?”

The two of them were still decked out in their villainous attire. Who knew what kind of comments they’d get back home?

“Okay, okay. There! Happy?”

With a word from Kouryu, Tomochika’s outfit transformed. She was once again wearing the same school uniform she’d been wearing upon arriving in this world. Naturally, Yogiri had undergone a similar transformation.

“And here’s your stuff too. Everything you had on the bus.”

Their bags suddenly thudded to the floor in front of them: Tomochika’s travel

bag and what appeared to be a large backpack belonging to Yogiri.

"Okay, now I'm really starting to feel like he's pushing us out!" Tomochika said.

"Anything else?" Kouryu asked. "If you want to take anything back with you, I'll get whatever you want."

"Bringing back stuff from another world would probably just cause problems, so I guess not," Tomochika said.

"All right, shall we get going?" Yogiri asked.

"Sure. I think he's made it quite clear we've worn out our welcome."

Tomochika stepped over to the sphere. Opening the door, she saw a flat floor inside. The interior was furnished with chairs and a table, so it seemed they could relax within. Yogiri followed her as she boarded the strange craft.

"I know he said it'll take us home, but it doesn't quite feel real, does it?" Yogiri commented.

"Yeah, claiming a ball like this takes you between worlds feels like a bit of a stretch."

The Celestial Axis was something like an enormous pipe. Apparently, it wasn't a physical place, but a conceptual corridor that connected different worlds, although the explanation had gone entirely over Tomochika's head.

"But if this is actually going to take us home, it's kind of a moving experience, isn't it?"

"How about instead of wallowing in your emotions, you just get going?" Kouryu suggested, interrupting them before they could start reminiscing.

The door of the sphere shut of its own accord. It wasn't like they couldn't open it again, but the message from Kouryu was quite clear.

"Man, what a jerk! Surely we can talk a little bit, can't we?!"

"A little, sure." Kouryu's voice came through a speaker somewhere in the sphere, allowing them to converse with him while he was outside. "I'll give you five minutes. When you want to leave, hit the start button on the middle console."

"That anxious, are you?" Tomochika replied. It seemed the god wasn't willing to forcibly send them away, likely for fear of making them angry. As such, he had left the timing of their departure to them.

"Oh, what about our surviving classmates?"

"I'll go talk to them later. I can send anyone who wants to go back after you."

"Why don't we all go back together?" Yogiri asked. It seemed he felt it was better to return as a group, to which Tomochika agreed.

“Don’t worry about it! You two need to go now!”

“Man, this guy is desperate!” Tomochika exclaimed.

“Anything else?”

“Hmm. There are quite a few people we know in this world. I feel bad leaving without saying goodbye to any of them.” Tomochika was thinking of all the people who helped them throughout their journey.

“If you have a message for them, tell me. I’ll send it along for you.”

“Couldn’t you use your powers to take us right to them?”

“And what if that ended up causing more trouble? If you really want to go home, you shouldn’t be risking your chance here.”

“I guess that’s kind of true.” After talking it over for a short time, the two of them came up with a number of messages for the people they’d be leaving behind.

“Is that all then? No regrets?”

As Kouryu continued trying to hurry them along, Tomochika found her initial irritation towards him turning into sympathy.

“Not really. I think I’m good to go,” Yogiri said.

“Me too, but going back being so easy feels...*too* easy.”

“Oh, actually, there was one thing I was thinking of asking you once we finally found a way back,” said Yogiri.

Tomochika looked at him, curious. He sounded strangely serious compared to his usual self.

“We were never friends before we came here. We really only stuck together because we didn’t have any other choice.”

“Ah, I guess so. We’d never really interacted before all this. All I knew about you was that you slept a lot.”

“So, I was wondering if we’ll go back to being strangers when we make it home.”

“Come on, I don’t see that happening.” Tomochika wasn’t nearly so heartless as to say, “We finally made it home; thanks for all your hard work. Okay, goodbye.” After all they had been through together, they had definitely formed some kind of bond.

“So...umm...when we get back...” Yogiri seemed to be having difficulty getting it out.

“Huh? Wha?”

Hold on, what is this? Is this a confession? Tomochika’s internal monologue started racing. *Wait, is that how you feel about me, Takatou?! I mean, I can’t say*

the thought didn't occur to me, and it's not like I haven't thought the same thing, but here? Now? I guess it'll feel less genuine if it's after we get back...

"Can we be friends?" Yogiri asked.

"That's it?!" Tomochika reflexively shouted back.

"Oh... Is that a no?"

"Not at all! We became friends a long time ago, didn't we?!"

"Really?"

"Jeez, how low can your confidence go?!"

"Then..."

"Yes, yes, we can be friends! Okay?" Feeling like her concerns had been ignored, Tomochika gave a blunt reply.

"Then, thanks. I look forward to our friendship." With that, he stuck out his hand, leaving Tomochika confused for a moment. "Uh, it's a handshake," he explained.

"Do friends need to be that formal?!" Still, it wasn't like she was going to ignore him or brush him off at this point. "Me too," she finally replied, and though a little bit timidly, she took his hand in hers.

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MY INSTANT DEATH ABILITY IS SO OVERPOWERED, NO ONE IN THIS OTHER WORLD STANDS A CHANCE AGAINST ME!

Side Story

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Side Story: Afterwards

The next thing she knew, Atila was standing face-to-face with an exhausted-looking boy. She was immediately beset by a feeling of unease and confusion. As a dragon, she could tell at a glance that this boy was a god, but why would a god be here? And what could have left him so tired? Why was she standing in the middle of a forest, when moments ago she'd been standing on top of the pyramid?

As Atila reeled with confusion, the boy slowly began to speak.

"Seriously... You owe me a really big thank-you for this one." He was immediately patronizing.

"Umm...I can tell that you are a god of some description, but besides that, I have no idea what is happening here," Atila said timidly. A whine at her side seemed to indicate that Dai felt the same way as he trotted over to her.

"Of course you wouldn't. That makes sense. Do you at least remember you were traveling with Yogiri Takatou and made it to the top of the pyramid?"

"Yes, I remember that much," she replied. Everything after that was a blur, though. The Great Sage had appeared, and she had the vague feeling she had gone over to his side, but anything beyond that was lost to her.

"So, after that, a hero showed up to attack the Great Sage and you two got killed in the process."

"Killed?!"

"You think it's weird that you're still alive, right? That's because I just brought you back to life."

At that, Atila found herself agreeing with the boy. She did very much owe him a great deal of thanks.

"You guys were totally vaporized, but it hadn't been that long since you died, so I was still able to bring you back. Of course, it took a huge amount of energy to do so."

That explained the boy's current state. For a god to be so worn out, he must have expended a tremendous amount of energy. The only question remaining was why he would go to such effort for some random dragon and dog.

"A god can do pretty much anything in the world they rule, even bring the

dead back to life, but that doesn't mean it's easy. This is a special exception. Bringing you back a second time if you die again isn't part of the deal."

"What deal might that be? I cannot say I remember making a contract with you..."

"Not with you. It was between me and Takatou. I told him that you guys died, and he asked if I could bring back Dai with my powers as a god. I was afraid to lie to him, so I said it was technically possible, but extremely difficult. And of course, he told me to do it anyway."

"I suppose I should offer my condolences..." Atila said.

"Anyway, he has a message for you: 'Please look after Dai.'"

"Ah. If that is all, then sure." Given the way things had gone, she couldn't really bring herself to refuse.

"Besides that, you wanted to get along well with humans, right?" the boy asked.

"Yes, I believe we discussed something along those lines." She and Tomochika had talked about it a bit.

"Dannoura asked me to help you out, so I'll introduce you to a nice community. It's a pretty small one, so it should be good for learning how to live alongside humankind."

Atila absolutely couldn't refuse an offer like that.

◇ ◇ ◇

The half-demons and vampires never joined Cavern Quest. For the time being, at least, they were capable of protecting themselves from the Seyla that rained from the sky. Once the world was completely overrun, life would get quite difficult, but they had emergency provisions to last them for a while, so they chose to hold out.

As a result, they knew nothing of what had occurred in Cavern Quest and only discovered at some point that the Seyla had been wiped out and peace had returned to the world. The damage wrought would take years to recover from, but that didn't have much impact on the half-demons. Just as they had before, they would keep their distance from humanity and continue their subsistence lifestyle.

"Hello. My name is Kouryu. I'm the god of this world."

A few days after the death of the Seyla, a young boy appeared to them. Risley and her family had been eating dinner when he suddenly popped into the

room beside them. There was no need to question his identity. Everyone present could recognize his divinity at a glance.

“What business do you have here?” Euphemia asked cautiously. She was fully aware of how fickle and cruel the gods could be.

“I have a message for you from Yogiri Takatou. Do you mind?”

“From Yogiri?” Risley’s heart began to race. Though she had never met him this time around, before the reset, she had had very strong feelings for him.

“I killed Seyla,” Yogiri’s voice resounded around them.

“Wait...that’s it?” Risley asked.

“Yup,” Kouryu replied. “I don’t know everything that happened in this world since he arrived, but that seemed to be the only lingering issue he had to talk about.”

“Where is he now?”

“He went back to his own world.”

“He went home?!”

“And by the way,” Kouryu continued, “if you are thinking of following him, I will do everything in my power to stop you. This world is cutting every tie it has with him. That’s the first law I’m imposing on this new iteration.”

“Ah...I see...” Risley had no response. It was all so sudden, she couldn’t get her thoughts in order.

“Also, this is a bit of a different issue, but could you look after these two for me?” As he said that, a girl and a dog appeared beside him. “These are Atila and Dai. Atila is used to living in the human world, but she hasn’t learned human common sense yet, so I’d like you to teach her.”

“Pleased to meet you!” Atila greeted them as Dai gave a happy bark.

“Very well...” Euphemia seemed confused, but she seemed to understand they weren’t in a position to refuse.

“Okay, see you, then. I’ve still got lots to do.” Kouryu immediately vanished.

“Lady Risley...” Euphemia turned to her with a concerned look.

“I mean...if he says we’re cutting ties with him, there’s not much I can do,” Risley admitted.

“And if Lady Lain never existed in this world, we didn’t have much of a connection to him to begin with.”

“I guess not.”

In truth, Risley’s deep affection for Yogiri had already started to fade. The rest would be up to time to resolve.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Yo."

A god suddenly appeared in Sage Sion's mansion. As she sat casually enjoying a cup of tea, she invited Kouryu to sit across from her.

"Have you figured out what's going on?" he asked.

"Well. Within the territory I can observe, the Seyla has been exterminated. I have to assume Takatou is responsible for that. That's about as much as I know."

"The Great Sage has been put into an eternal sleep too, so the one giving you guys the authority to rule this world is gone."

Sion could only assume Yogiri was responsible for that as well. She couldn't imagine anyone else having the ability to neutralize the Great Sage.

"I see. So how do you intend to deal with us, then?" she asked.

"Good question. I can't really ignore the way you guys have been running rampant across the world. I'd like to ask you to minimize your interactions with other people from now on. I don't want anything else from you."

"If that is the case, I do not mind complying. Can I assume you will handle the Aggressors from now on?"

"Yeah. They probably won't show up nearly as often anymore, but it's the god's job to take care of invaders in the first place."

"Then there is no issue on my end. I shall take the chance to have a leisurely life. Is that all you came here to tell me?"

"I also have a message for you from Takatou," the boy said.

"Make sure you look after the people you summoned," came Yogiri's voice.

"That is all? Well...I suppose we were not close enough for him to send anything more intimate." Sion was a bit taken aback by how utilitarian the message was, but she had to admit, now that the world had been reset, she hadn't paid all that much attention to the class of Sage Candidates. "If he is sending me a message like that, am I to assume he made it back to his own world?"

"Yup. I kind of half forced him to leave."

"Will you not be sending his classmates back as well?" she asked.

"That comes next. Getting rid of him was my top priority. I didn't want to tempt fate by waiting for him to meet up with everyone."

"A wise decision," Sion replied. "Do you know where the others are?"

"You know everyone who was on the bus went to Cavern Quest, right?"

"Of course. I personally helped them to get there." When they had gone into Cavern Quest, Sion had delivered the Gift to them directly.

“So, Cavern Quest was destroyed, sending everyone in it back to the surface,” the boy explained. “I’m going to go find them and talk to them next.”

“My, I didn’t expect such great service from you.”

“Anything to avoid Takatou’s ire. I’ve gotta do everything I can.”

“You will be sending them back as well, correct? Shall I assist you?”

“I’m not sure,” Kouryu replied. “If they don’t want to go back, I feel like I have no reason to force them.”

“I see. Assuming any such people exist, of course.”

“You came from a different world too, didn’t you?” Kouryu asked. “I can send you back as well, if you like.”

“It seems a bit late for that,” Sion replied after taking a short time to think. She had already forgotten the vast majority of her past life, so had no strong feelings about that world.

“All right. In that case, I’ll be on my way. Oh! There’s one more thing!” As Kouryu stood to leave, one more thought occurred to him.

“What is it?”

“From now on, could you avoid summoning people from other worlds?” he asked.

“Naturally. I have learned full well there are true monsters out there that defy the imagination. Knowing that they exist, I could hardly risk summoning one of them again.”

“Glad to hear it.” With that, Kouryu vanished.

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“Was someone just here?” Youichi, Sion’s attendant, asked, stepping into the room. He had lost function in much of his body thanks to Yogiri, but with magical support, he was able to go about his daily life as usual.

“Yes, to deliver a message. It seems we have been relieved of our duties here. The Sages’ rule over this world has been dissolved.”

“What? How did that happen?” Youichi wasn’t quite able to swallow what she was saying.

“As such, it is time for a vacation!”

“A vacation?” he echoed. He very clearly was being left behind by the conversation.

◇ ◇ ◇

When Ein awoke, he was lying on a soft bed. He had fought the Great Sage, exhausted all of his power, and been thoroughly crushed despite his efforts. Even so, he was entirely unhurt. Though he didn’t understand why, he didn’t have the energy to cause a fuss. He had perfectly understood just how outmatched he had been.

It was quiet. The room had a calm, peaceful atmosphere, which was utterly smashed by someone slamming open the door.

“Hey! You awake?” A woman strode shamelessly into the room.

“You are?”

“Rio.”

“Where—”

“Mitsuki’s house.”

Ein looked around, starting to panic.

“Don’t worry, he’s not here right now,” Rio explained. “You had quite a rough time, didn’t you?”

“Why am I here?” Ein asked.

“Alexia brought you. She said you wanted to take Ariel home with you?”

“Is she... Is she here?” Ein was almost afraid to ask. He had lost. Even so, he was alive and had been brought to the Great Sage’s abode. Things were going so well for him, he had a hard time believing it was real.

“Sure. I was told to let you meet her. So? Think you can manage?”

“Y-Yeah...” He didn’t seem to be injured in any way. He wasn’t even tired. But still, he hesitated. He recalled the Ariel from before the world reset all too well.

“Okay, I’ll take you to her.” Rio stepped out of the room.

Steeling himself, Ein got out of bed and followed her. Things hadn’t gone the way he had planned, but in the end he was still getting to see Ariel. There was no point in being scared of moving forward now.

Stepping out of the room, he found himself in a resplendent garden. Rather than being dominated by a huge mansion, it was dotted with small buildings here and there. They each seemed to be homes for individuals, similar to the one Ein had just emerged from.

Rio wasted no time in getting moving, so Ein had to hurry to follow her. After walking for a time, they stopped in front of a particular house.

“Ariel, you in there?” Rio knocked on the door.

“I’m here!” a nostalgic, unforgettable voice answered from inside.

“Are you free? Your brother wants to see you.”

The door opened, revealing Ariel on the other side.

“Ariel...are you okay?” Ein asked.

“Uh, why wouldn’t I be?” she replied, a bit confused.

“Do you know who I am?”

“You’re my brother, Ein, right? So, why are you here?”

“Let’s go home!”

“Huh? I’d rather not,” she replied with obvious disdain.

“But...you’re only here because they kidnapped you!”

“That’s true, but I chose to stay here of my own accord. I can leave any time I want to.”

“Then why?! What are you still doing here?!”

“Lord Mitsuki is here,” she answered. “Why would I ever leave?”

“Okay, I understand!” Ein said. “He’s put some kind of magic on you! Don’t worry, I’ll find a way to fix this!” He took Ariel’s hand.

“Stop! Let go of me!”

“We’re going home!”

“Oh, by the way,” Rio interrupted their argument, “you can’t force her to leave or anything. You wouldn’t even know how to get out of here, would you?”

As she said, he had no idea how he was going to get out of this place.

“I said let go!” Ariel shook off her brother’s grip. He had been holding back so as not to hurt her, but even so, he was still a Hero. He could hardly believe she had the strength to resist him. An awful memory surfaced in his mind, of the time before the reset. Memories of the kind of fits Ariel would throw after she had been sent home.

“Umm...I’m not going to get involved, so you two settle this,” Rio said before stepping away.

“Just leave! I belong to Lord Mitsuki now! I’m happy here!” Ariel glared at him like he was a sworn enemy.

“Damn...it’s the same as before!”

Nothing he could say would change her mind. He hadn’t thought things through well enough. He had been optimistic that as long as he could find her, things would work out, but clearly, that wasn’t going to happen.

“If you don’t leave...I’ll kill you!”

Ein started to panic at the open hostility coming from his sister. He had no idea what he was supposed to do. But just as he was about to accept that everything was going to be the same, that things would end exactly as they had before the reset, his sister collapsed.

“Ariel!” Ein dashed forward and lifted her up in his arms. She had just passed out. “What is happening?”

“I’m just cleaning up.”

Turning at the new voice, Ein saw the Great Sage’s secretary, Alexia, standing behind him.

“I have erased all memories of Lord Mitsuki from her mind. You should have no issue bringing her home now.”

“But...why?” Ein asked. “Isn’t that against what the Great Sage wants?”

“He no longer has any such will.”

“So...you’re helping me?” It was all still too hard to believe. The Great Sage’s closest ally coming to save him was too convenient to be true.

“I am not here for your sake,” Alexia replied. “I just wish to be the only one remaining who knows of Lord Mitsuki. Driving you out of this place is not for your sake either. You will only be in my way here.”

As she finished speaking, the scenery around Ein changed dramatically. He was suddenly standing in his old home, in the forest outside the city.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I thought you weren’t helping us...”

Despite her words, Ein felt like he had been rescued. Gently he laid his sister down on a bed that hadn’t been touched in ages. He had no idea what she would be like when she woke up, but he could only hope things would go better than they had last time.

◇ ◇ ◇

At present, the greatest threat to the world was easily the invasive life form that had fallen from the sky. The Divine King was expending every effort to combat it. Raining down across the entire world at once, infecting and assimilating any life it encountered, there were no half measures when attempting to deal with it.

Being immortal, simply fighting the creatures was out of the question. Even incinerating them would result in them reappearing where they had vanished, so blowing them away seemed to be the only option. With the abilities of the Divine King and her Knights, the creatures could be thrown a considerable distance, and so they had managed to create a reasonably safe area. However, their efforts were all but trying to cool a hot stone with a few drops of water. They had persisted for now, but if they were to be attacked by a large number of the creatures all at once, they would easily be overrun.

However, the Divine King wasn't just sitting on her hands. The events in the Crystal Plains had provided a hint for her. The invasive life forms possessed some measure of intelligence, as they attempted to avoid being crystallized. In other words, as immortal as they were, they couldn't resist being transformed.

The current plan the Divine King and her Knights had concocted was to petrify them. If the creatures were stuck in place, it could limit the spread of damage. But there was no point if they were only petrifying the enemy one at a time. They would need to hit a huge area all at once.

And so, the Divine King began the construction of a new tower, a facility for the collection and amplification of a huge amount of magical energy. It was built on the plains outside the capital of Manii. They cleared the area and fortified it, keeping out the invaders while building the tower.

One day, while the Divine King was leading the forces protecting the tower, a young boy appeared in front of her.

"Do you have a minute?"

As a member of the Axis Church, the Divine King worshiped no particular god. However, she could still recognize such a being at a single glance.

"Yes, but I cannot speak for long."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," the boy explained. "The Seyla are gone now. You don't need to finish the tower or sacrifice any more of your followers. That's what I came to tell you."

"I cannot bring myself to believe you so easily..." the Divine King replied.

"You can check for yourself."

Without some sort of evidence, there was no way she would stop their plan

partway through. The Divine King called over those who were responsible for defending their encampment. Apparently, there had been no attacks for quite some time. That in and of itself was abnormal. Until now, the invasive species had attacked quite regularly.

"Very well. I understand. I will not call the plan off entirely, but for now, at least, I will suspend operations."

The Divine King gave the order, and work came to a halt. However, the tower they were building was not specialized for dealing with the Seyla. It could be put to use for a wide array of purposes. In other words, it would also help to deal with Yogiri Takatou.

Before the world reset, she had been making preparations to seal him away. The UEG had ended up interfering with her plans, but the threat Yogiri posed still remained. If the invasive species was gone, she could turn her attention to dealing with him now.

"The next thing is that Yogiri Takatou has left this world, so you don't have to worry about him anymore."

"Excuse me?" the Divine King stiffened at his words. "Has the Great Sage done something about him?"

She had heard the Great Sage's message, that he would reset the world again after Yogiri Takatou was killed. That plan couldn't have come to fruition yet, though—if it had, the world would have been reset. There were no signs of that happening now. That meant Yogiri should still be alive, which left her confused at Kouryu's words.

"To tell the story in order, the Great Sage's plan failed. After putting him into an eternal sleep, Takatou went back to his own world."

"He is...no longer here?"

"That's right. Takatou isn't a threat to this world anymore. Okay, maybe that's going too far. The threat he posed to this world is *mostly* gone. That should be safe to say."

"That is absurd! He left without taking any responsibility for what he has done?!"

"No matter your feelings, he had his own reasons," Kouryu said. "And in spite of what complaints you may have, the fact is, he's gone now. So I'd rather you turned your efforts towards rebuilding this world. I feel bad for you, but this is your world, after all. It's your responsibility to fix it."

Having said his piece, Kouryu vanished.

"I suppose...we must first confirm the state of things, then."

The world as it was faced a tremendous number of problems. There were plenty of complaints she had for Yogiri Takatou, but if he was never going to return, she couldn't let herself obsess over him. Putting a hold on the construction of what now seemed to be a useless tower, she turned her efforts first to proving that the Seyla had truly been dealt with.

◇ ◇ ◇

Defeated in the second round of the last stage of the Last Boss Quest, then summoned by Sora Akino's ability after Yogiri had been victorious and left, Hanakawa was left alone. While Yogiri had gone on to the third round, he hadn't been part of Hanakawa's group and had left him behind.

Hanakawa was at a total loss. If Carol and Ryouko had been around, he would have felt more confident, but he was standing alone in the city park.

"So...what am I supposed to do now? I suppose the ideal would be to reunite with Carol and Ryouko, but..."

Even looking around for them would be a challenge. There were likely still parties searching for opponents to advance themselves to the third round. For now, he decided to hide behind one of the trees in the park. It probably would do little to protect him, but it was at least better than standing out in the open.

After hiding for a while, an announcement played in the air above him.

Last Boss Quest, Final Stage, Round Two: Finished!

"Finished?! I had already assumed I would not be winning at this point, but does this mean I no longer have to worry about fighting?"

Hanakawa timidly poked his head out from behind the tree. There were no signs of the area having changed, nor of anyone appearing to attack him.

"Hm? But then, what am I to do now?"

In the worst case, the losers would be rounded up and executed, but it didn't seem anything like that was happening. However, "nothing happening" was in and of itself going to prove to be a problem.

"Am I going to be left in this place forever?!"

That thought drew Hanakawa out of his hiding place. Wandering around the city, he found no one. At first, he was relieved at the lack of enemies, but the complete loneliness was now starting to make him feel uneasy.

"I suppose the vast majority of the losers were killed? Survivors like me are

likely a rare case." There was a good chance Van hadn't made any considerations for people like him. "Ugh...being abandoned on an uninhabited island like this is too much."

Hanakawa continued plodding around the city. He checked inside a few buildings, but naturally, they were all empty. While they were furnished to some degree, they showed no sign of having been lived in. They seemed to have been arranged perfectly for show, meaning this area had likely been prepared as a mere backdrop for the game.

"If this is an island in the sky, I suppose jumping off it is an option. Hopefully there is water below us...though I have heard that falling from such a height into water is similar to hitting concrete. But wait, my level as a Monk should provide some resilience, should it not? Together with my regenerative abilities, I imagine I should be able to manage."

If he could make it back to the beach, he could go through the gate and reach the starting town. But as he set out to search for the edge of the island, he heard a noise in the distance.

"Hm? Is this perhaps the sound of footsteps? Hello! Is someone there?!"

Perhaps they were an enemy, but for now, Hanakawa's desire to see another person had won out.

"Y-Yes! I'm here!" A man emerged from the shadow of a building. He was tall and thin, looking somehow a little pathetic, and Hanakawa thought he looked a bit familiar. He was likely one of the many people he had seen on top of the pyramid.

"My name is Daimon Hanakawa. Might I ask yours?"

"Ah, yes. I'm Lynel. I lost in round two and was left here..." It seemed he had met a similar fate to Hanakawa's. "So, what are we supposed to do now?"

"I have been pondering the same question myself. I have a bit of a hunch, at the very least."

"And what would that be?" Lynel asked.

"If we leap off the side of the island, perhaps we will be able to make it back to the city. That is all I have."

"I see. I was so confused I hadn't thought much about it, but that sounds reasonable to me. Let's go give it a try."

With that, the two began searching for the edge of the island together. Leaving the castle town, passing through the fields and forests, they made it to their destination. Looking down, they could see nothing but white, as if the island floated inside a giant cumulonimbus cloud.

“Is it actually safe for us to jump off here?” Lynel asked.

“Now that I see it for myself, I am starting to lose confidence. Out of curiosity, do you have some method to survive the fall?”

“Yeah, I’ve got these star crystals,” he said, pulling out some rainbow stones from his pocket. “They can be used to heal me or boost my stats for a short time. Besides that, I guess their only use is to roll the gacha.”

“Ha ha, a gacha, huh? What are the chances you might win an aircraft?”

“I’ve never gotten anything that nice from it before,” he replied.

As they considered their options, a line cut through the world. It had been sliced in two and started coming apart, but there was no way for the two of them to know that. They did understand, however, that something unbelievable was happening—the first of many such events.

In short order, they appeared in the Crystal Plains. The Seyla attacking them suddenly stopped moving, a huge number of star forts appeared in the sky above them, and then they suddenly all fell to the ground. The pair could do nothing but watch, stupefied, as the ridiculous happenings continued. The earth shook as the massive structures struck the ground, but luckily none of them had fallen near the two of them.

“Hey. My name is Kouryu. You’re Hanakawa, right?”

After they had been staring dumbly for a while, a boy calling himself Kouryu appeared beside them.

“Yes, that would be me,” Hanakawa replied, curious.

“I know this is a bit sudden, but Takatou has gone home.”

“How did that happen?!”

“He defeated the Great Sage. That got me what I needed to send him back, so I had him go right away. Now I’m going around checking if anyone else wants to go home.”

“I would much prefer to stay here!” Hanakawa replied instantly. With the Great Sage gone and the Sages no longer ruling over the world, he felt it would turn into a much safer place. He had already planned on staying if he could avoid that danger to any extent, so knowing the Sages were gone was just a bonus.

“If you change your mind later, it’ll be too late. You okay with that?” Kouryu asked.

“Of course! There is nothing interesting waiting for me back home!”

“Um, is it possible you could send me back?” Lynel asked. “I was reborn in this world, but I originally came from a different one.”

Hanakawa had figured it was something like that, considering he knew what

a gacha was.

“You were reincarnated here, huh? That’s a bit different...but for now I’ll put you in the group. It’s up to the god of that world what happens to you when you get there, though. All right, that’s all for now.”

Kouryu and Lynel disappeared, leaving Hanakawa on his own.

“W-Well, I am far different than I was before...” Hanakawa was now a high-level Monk and still possessed Friendship Counter. He figured he’d find some way to make it work.

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Side Story: Return

Apparently, the vehicles that carried people between Celestial Foundations were simply called “lifts.” Yogiri pressed the large red button he found at the center of the lift’s console. That was supposedly all he needed to do, but there was no sign that the lift was moving after he pressed it. Of course, he didn’t really know what it meant to move between Foundations in the first place, so he had no idea whether that was strange or not.

“Oh, look! I think we’re moving!” Tomochika said, staring out a window.

Yogiri stepped alongside her and looked outside to see countless rainbow lights streaming by. “What are those? Stars? This is starting to give me kind of a fairy-tale vibe.”

“It would look lonely if there was nothing at all, so there’s a bit of visual flair for atmosphere,” Kouryu’s voice explained to them.

“Wait, you’re still here?!” Tomochika exclaimed.

“I can’t rest easy until I know you guys made it back safe, can I? If you changed your mind halfway there and turned around, I’d be in trouble.”

“I have no intention of doing so, but *could* we turn around if we wanted to?”

“If you really want to know, I’ll tell you. I can’t afford to be on your bad side, after all. I know you can use your power no matter how far apart we are. But this isn’t something I want to share so casually. If you really *have to know, then ask and I’ll tell you.”*

“It’s just idle curiosity, so if you’re *that* worried, you don’t have to bother. But it’s not just as simple as pressing this button again, is it?” The only button on the console was the one Yogiri had pushed to get them moving. It seemed to be the only way to control the lift.

“Feel free to press it as much as you like. It stopped working after you pressed it the first time.”

“You’re really that worried about us, huh?” Tomochika sighed.

“Anyway, please relax. I won’t bother you unless you call for me.”

“One last question. How long will it take us to get home?”

“It should feel like about thirty minutes. I think you’ve figured this out from someone else, but when you make it home, people won’t think you’ve been gone

for a huge amount of time. I can't give you a concrete number, but it'll only be like a few minutes to a few dozen minutes have passed."

"Wasn't getting to your world instant, though?!" Tomochika said. Their class had been transported on the bus. Yogiri had been asleep at the time, so he didn't know how it had happened, but Tomochika seemed to find it baffling.

After a while of watching the window, Yogiri got bored and took a seat. There was a table inside the lift, so they had a spot to rest.

Tomochika eventually sat down opposite him. "I really don't get this Foundation and Axis stuff."

"It's totally outside our realm of understanding, huh?" Yogiri agreed.

I suppose this is the proper way one should use to travel between worlds, Mokomoko added.

"Oh, you're still here?" Tomochika asked, looking towards the ghost now floating behind her.

Of course I am! Why would you think I disappeared?!

"I mean, you appeared after I traveled to another world, so I figured you'd disappear after we got back."

I have always been guarding you. You were just never able to perceive me!

"But, like, what are you going to do now? Are you just going to be floating around me all the time? It'll be pretty hard to live my life if I see you everywhere."

Oh, this child still has not learned any respect for her ancestors...

But seeing something that no one else could certainly risked making things awkward for Tomochika. If she responded to events happening around her in a way that was different from other people, it could cause problems in her daily life.

No matter. Once we return, I will be able to travel around to some extent. I have no intention of spending every waking moment following you.

"Thank goodness!"

You seem far too relieved...

Tomochika hadn't awakened to any sort of supernatural ability to see spirits. The only one she could see was Mokomoko. Yogiri was the same, but they had been uneasy about how it would all work out. They knew they could see a spirit once they realized that it existed, so if they encountered some spiritual phenomenon, they might end up being able to see the entity causing it. And if that happened numerous times, they might develop the ability to see spirits in general.

Hopefully I'm just worrying over nothing, Yogiri thought. At this point, he didn't feel like there was anything to gain from dwelling on the matter.

"Did you know the world was set up this way, Mokomoko?"

Indeed. I knew of worlds outside our own, and of the Upper Level Information Layer that exists above them, though I was unaware that one could use the Celestial Axis to travel between worlds.

"So you were only able to exchange information?"

Precisely. While I was aware that something out there existed, I could not learn about the particulars. I thought perhaps they were information-based life forms, but it appears they were physical beings after all.

"I guess there are all kinds of worlds..."

Well...truth be told, you having knowledge of them is in and of itself a large problem...

"Not that I wanted to know any of this," Yogiri replied. With him having no knowledge of these worlds, the chances of him affecting them were next to zero. But now he had learned other worlds existed. Though he wouldn't proactively be attacking them or anything, the chance of them getting caught in the cross fire as he dealt with other issues had increased.

"This stuff about other worlds is interesting and all, but aren't things going to be really difficult for us once we get back? What about our school trip?"

"I guess it'll be canceled."

I cannot imagine it will be that simple. A number of your classmates have died, after all, Mokomoko remarked.

"Oh, right," Tomochika said.

Did you honestly forget?

"Of course not! But...I guess it's something I just sort of accepted, since we couldn't do anything about it!"

"Maybe it's not my place to say this, but you're pretty tough, aren't you?" Yogiri commented.

"That's not really the kind of compliment a girl wants to hear!"

Well, a good portion of her psyche has been compartmentalized for combat. The Dannoura Way covers most of that. Besides, the current Dannoura Way prizes emotional refinement as much as physical!

"You make it sound like I've been genetically modified or something."

Unfortunately, the best we can manage in the present age is selective breeding. We cannot risk going beyond that in today's society.

"What exactly were you doing in the past, then?" Yogiri asked, though he

wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Anyway, let's put all that depressing talk behind us!"

The deaths of your classmates amounts to no more than "depressing talk"?

"What do we want to do when we get back? We should talk about that instead!"

"After we get back? I guess I have a lot of games to catch up on." Though it wasn't like he didn't enjoy his portable games, Yogiri's real desire was to play on the big screen.

"Going back to your hunting games?" Tomochika asked.

"I only played that one because it was popular at the time. Normally, I play RPGs."

"What we just went through was basically a fantasy RPG, but you didn't seem all that excited about it."

"I think I was pretty excited," Yogiri replied. From monsters, to beastkin, to dungeons, to otherworldly sights...though he hadn't caused much of a fuss at seeing them, he had found it all quite intriguing.

"You didn't show it at all!"

"What about you? What do you want to do when you get back?"

"Hmm...maybe go clothes shopping?"

"Didn't you buy an awful lot of clothes on our trip?"

"Even if I brought them back with me, I couldn't exactly wear clothes like that back home!"

"Oh, is that it?" It felt like bringing things back from another world would cause problems, but whatever the reason, it seemed like they had made the right choice in not doing so.

"What about you, Takatou? What kind of clothes do you wear?"

"What kind of clothes? I mean, basically the same as always. Like a T-shirt and jeans."

"Yeah, I guess a lot of guys are like that."

As their conversation wandered, from what stores they wanted to visit to what foods they wanted to eat, the scenery outside the window changed. The sparkling lights flying by disappeared.

"Does that mean we made it?"

"I wonder. It's kind of hard to tell what's going on." It still didn't feel like they'd moved at all, so it was hard to gauge whether they had stopped. As they puzzled over the problem, the door of the lift opened on its own.

"I guess that means we're here?"

“We don’t have much choice but to get off.” Picking up his bag, Yogiri stood up and walked over to the door. The view outside was the same dim corridor they had seen before boarding the lift. But nothing would change if they didn’t disembark, so Yogiri stepped off the lift, followed soon after by Tomochika. They still seemed to be in the Celestial Axis, as the area looked identical to the one Kouryu had brought them to earlier.

“So, assuming we’re here...where’s the exit?” Yogiri asked. There didn’t seem to be any way out.

“We maintain control of the Celestial Axis. You cannot simply enter and exit as you please.”

Yogiri turned towards the new voice and saw a woman in an ancient-looking robe. It seemed even older than the Heian-era clothing Mokomoko wore.

“Who are you?”

“I am a god.”

“I see. You look like someone who’d show up in Japanese mythology. You’re from Earth, right?”

“Correct. This is the world you two came from.”

“Is it okay for a god to wear such culturally specific clothing?” Yogiri asked.

“There are far too many gods in this world to count. I am responsible only for a small part of Japan.”

“Huh...so there really are gods...” Tomochika seemed impressed. They had met people claiming to be gods in the other world, but that had been an entirely different world, so it hadn’t quite felt the same. Meeting a god from her own world felt real in a whole different sense.

To be fair, even I am rather close to a god in some ways, Mokomoko commented.

“Among the countless gods, I suppose there are some at such a low level. However, they hardly matter.”

“Apparently, you’re really low level,” Tomochika echoed.

I hardly matter? Mokomoko asked, despondent.

“I kind of want to go home. Can you get us out of here?” Yogiri interjected.

“Of course. But just in case, I must ask you: as of right now, it is still possible to return to the world you just came from. Are you not interested?”

“Not at all.”

“I see. That is rather aggravating. Here I thought I had finally gotten rid of you.”

“Wait, does this god actually dislike us?” Tomochika asked.

“Worry not. The gods of the present age hardly ever interfere with human endeavors. The most we can do is tilt your fortune-telling to a negative light.”

“That’s still kind of annoying!” It seemed she was saying that asking anything of the gods was next to pointless.

“This is your final chance. Once you leave the Celestial Axis, you will have no option to return.”

“That’s fine.” There was nothing for Yogiri to think about.

“Then I shall send you inside. Are you happy to appear in the place you vanished?”

“I guess that’s a good question. If we suddenly appeared back home, things would look pretty suspicious. Yeah, that works.”

“Very well.”

The scenery in front of them instantly transformed.

“Ah! Gah! It’s so cold!” The gusting snow seemed to rob Tomochika of much of her vocabulary. With all that had happened, they had almost forgotten that their school trip had been to go skiing. Being sent back to the place they vanished from meant they were going to appear in the snowy mountains.

“I probably have some clothing for this weather in here.” Yogiri pulled a sweater out of his bag. It made sense that they’d have prepared for this climate if they were going somewhere so cold for their trip.

Tomochika followed suit, hurriedly digging through her things for a down jacket. “So, where exactly are we?”

“Hmm...we were in the other world after going through a tunnel, so we’re probably pretty close to there?”

Fool. You are back on Earth. You can just use the GPS on your phone, Mokomoko quipped.

“Oh, right.”

Yogiri pulled out his phone and checked their location. Luckily, they still had reception, so he was able to find out they weren’t that far from the ski resort.

“The date is the same as our school trip’s...and it’s about 7 p.m. That’s probably close to when we were expecting to arrive, right?” Having connected to the network, his phone was able to synchronize its date and time again. As Kouryu had mentioned, barely any time seemed to have passed in this world.

“Yeah, that sounds about right,” Tomochika replied. They could check the paperwork for their trip to find out for sure, but they had better things to do than stand around in a snowstorm and read. The two began walking towards the ski resort.

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They made it to the ski resort and asked for shelter. The story they came up with was that the bus had crashed, the two of them had been thrown outside, and they had barely managed to make it out themselves.

The bus had left this world, and a number of the students who had been on it were now dead, so any sort of search effort would turn up a lot of questions, but for now they just needed to get through the present. Yogiri was sure the Institute would handle the rest. They wasted no time worrying about the law when they acted, so they could smooth things over if the situation became difficult.

Naturally, the school trip was canceled, and the Institute sent a car to bring Yogiri and Tomochika home.

"And how exactly are we getting out of this?!" Tomochika exclaimed.

"The ninjas will probably figure something out," Yogiri answered.

"These ninjas sound incredible!"

As they sat in the back of the car, Yogiri's phone rang.

"Hellooooo! You guys doing good?" It was Carol.

Assuming Tomochika would want to listen in, Yogiri switched to speakerphone. "You guys made it back too?"

"Almost everyone who was still alive made it back! We're at the ski resort!"

It seemed they had only been half an hour or so behind Yogiri and Tomochika. Considering the difference in the passage of time between the two worlds, they had apparently made it back almost simultaneously, but there was a bit more of a delay with the god letting them back into Earth.

"'Almost'?"

"Hanakawa decided to stay on the other side!"

Their homeroom teacher, the bus driver, and the surviving classmates had all made it back.

"What was Hanakawa thinking?!" Tomochika cried.

"Well...if he wanted to stay, I guess they couldn't force him to leave."

"Hi, it's Ninomiya. I've made contact with the Institute. They have already started moving to take care of the situation, so no need to worry."

"That's good to hear, as long as they don't erase my memory!" Carol chimed in.

The cover story the Institute decided on was that the bus had fallen from a rural road. A number of the occupants had died in the crash, and since there were no bodies to show, they would provide dummies to take their place.

“Wait, they can erase people’s memories?” Tomochika asked.

“Sounds likely to me,” said Yogiri.

The Institute had plenty of technology the rest of the world didn’t know about. It wouldn’t be strange if they had some sort of drug that erased your memory.

“Sounds like an evil organization to me.”

“Yeah, Asaka said the same thing.”

“Okay, see you guys at school!”

“Are we seriously going to be able to return to school like normal?”

“Back when I was in elementary school, a full bus of us got kidnapped, but we ended up making things work.”

“What kind of life have you had?” Tomochika muttered.

The car ride lasted through the night, getting them home as the sun rose in the morning.

“All right, see you later. I’ll talk to you again once things have calmed down a bit. Since we’re friends now!” Tomochika left first, getting off at her house.

After a bit more driving, Yogiri made it back to his apartment. Waiting out front was the woman who had stood in as a parent for him—Asaka Takatou—and their dog, Nikori.

“I have to say, I have no idea what’s going on here. What happened?!”

Asaka was one of the few people who knew about Yogiri’s true nature. She had likely been told more of the behind-the-scenes details than anyone else, so it made sense that she was extremely confused.

“It’s, uhh, kind of hard to explain. But it wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear it.” Asaka was used to these kinds of things happening at this point.

“Anyway, I’m back.” Though it seemed a bit late, Yogiri still felt it was appropriate to say it.

Asaka responded with a bright smile. “Welcome home.”

And finally, it truly felt like he had come home.

Afterword

Volume 14, the final one. Thank you so much for reading this far. Not that I expected the series to be canceled or anything, but I was able to keep writing for a lot longer than I had expected. That is all thanks to you readers. Truly, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

I guess I started by thanking people, but I've got lots more thanks to go. It was announced a while ago, so many of you probably already know, but this series was green-lit for an anime! This is also only thanks to your continued support. Thank you so much! At the time I'm writing this, I can't say anything beyond that an anime is confirmed, but I expect more details will come out mid-2023, so please wait for a bit. Further announcements will come out on Earth Star Novels's main website and on Twitter, so please check with them.

I will be excitedly sharing any news on my own Twitter (https://twitter.com/fujitaka_t), so you can check there as well!

My final thanks:

To my supervising editor: almost every volume came in at the very last minute, so I feel like I've put you through a lot of stress, but thank you for sticking with me until the end.

To the illustrator, Chisato Naruse: your artwork has been incredible throughout. Thank you so much! I'm glad you stayed through the whole series, and I hope we can work together again in the future!

藤孝 剛志
Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

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TV Anime

Tomochika: We're going to be in an anime! One that you can actually watch on TV!
Mokomoko: *Did you really need to specify that part?*
Tomochika: Being on TV is really important!
Yogiri: Is there anything for us to actually talk about for the anime, though?
Mokomoko: *Yes, just like the Question Corners, we are once again broadcasting from a mysterious space outside that of the main novels!*
Tomochika: That means we know quite a bit about the anime.
Yogiri: But even if we know, that doesn't mean we can share much.
Tomochika: I don't know. Can we talk about, like, who the voice actors will be?
Mokomoko: *By the way, my voice actor will be the illustrious so-and-so!*
Tomochika: If you're not going to actually say it, why did you bring it up at all?!
Yogiri: It's probably obvious, but there isn't really anything we can say at this point.
Mokomoko: *The most we can say is that such and such important characters will be voiced by so-and-so!*
Tomochika: You still didn't tell us anything!
Yogiri: What about the broadcast date?
Mokomoko: *We can say nothing!*
Tomochika: So there's actually nothing for us to tell them!
Mokomoko: *More information should be available in the middle of 2023, so until then there is nothing we can say!*
Yogiri: What about how much of the story it's going to cover?
Mokomoko: *Of course, we can say nothing on that front either!*
Tomochika: Then what's the point of this "TV Anime Announcement Space" anyway?!
Yogiri: Maybe trying to say anything concrete was the wrong approach.
Tomochika: Then, what about our hopes for the anime? Surely we can talk about what we're excited to see, right?

Mokomoko: *But how will that work when we are characters in the story?*
Yogiri: If you worry about those kinds of small details, you've already lost.
Tomochika: So, what was your first impression when you heard we were getting an anime?
Yogiri: I thought, "Well, that's good. But wait, is it really going to work?" It was a pretty complicated feeling.
Tomochika: Yeah...I had thoughts like, "Is this ethically okay?" Or, "Will people really find it funny as an anime?"
Mokomoko: *Indeed. I thought the only stories that became anime were ones full of beautiful girls and a totally plain protagonist who suddenly obtains immense power and smirks as he crushes everyone around him!*
Tomochika: You really managed to cram a lot of spite and prejudice in there, didn't you?!
Mokomoko: *At any rate, what are you hoping to see in the anime adaptation?*
Yogiri: Hm...intense battle scenes?
Tomochika: How could there be?! Everyone dies instantly!
Mokomoko: *In my case, it would be great fan service from the beautiful young girls that follow the protagonist on his journey.*
Tomochika: Except we don't have any of those either! It's just the two of us and a ghost!
Mokomoko: *The fact you see me as no more than a ghost is very revealing about your feelings towards me in general...*
Yogiri: So, what'll even be in there? There are no battles with the main character, and there aren't any heroines.
Mokomoko: *Then I suppose it comes down to this: the demands of multiple heroines must all be shouldered by Tomochika alone.*
Tomochika: No, thank you! I don't need your weird responsibilities!
Yogiri: Well...I guess they don't count as heroines, but there are quite a few female characters.
Tomochika: And most of them die as soon as they show up!
Mokomoko: *Very true. Normally against a woman, one attempts to force them to surrender so they can make an ally out of them!*
Yogiri: If they're an enemy, we have no choice but to beat them, right?
Tomochika: And I'm being serious when I say I don't think they're wasted as characters at all...
Mokomoko: *Besides, it is not like he is capable of going easy on others with his power. Holding back so that the beautiful girls might become allies in the future*

would be quite difficult for him...unless the anime were to change his power to allow that to take place?
Yogiri: I haven't heard anything like that, so I assume it's going to be the same as in the novels.
Tomochika: Yeah, that would really change the concept of the whole story, wouldn't it? It would kind of defeat the purpose of picking this series for an anime in the first place.
Yogiri: Exactly. So I think it'll follow the novels pretty closely.
Mokomoko: *Well, how are we to end this section?*
Yogiri: The same as always, right?
Tomochika: We'll be hard at work producing *My Instant Death Ability is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!* for its upcoming broadcast! We hope you're as excited about it as we are!

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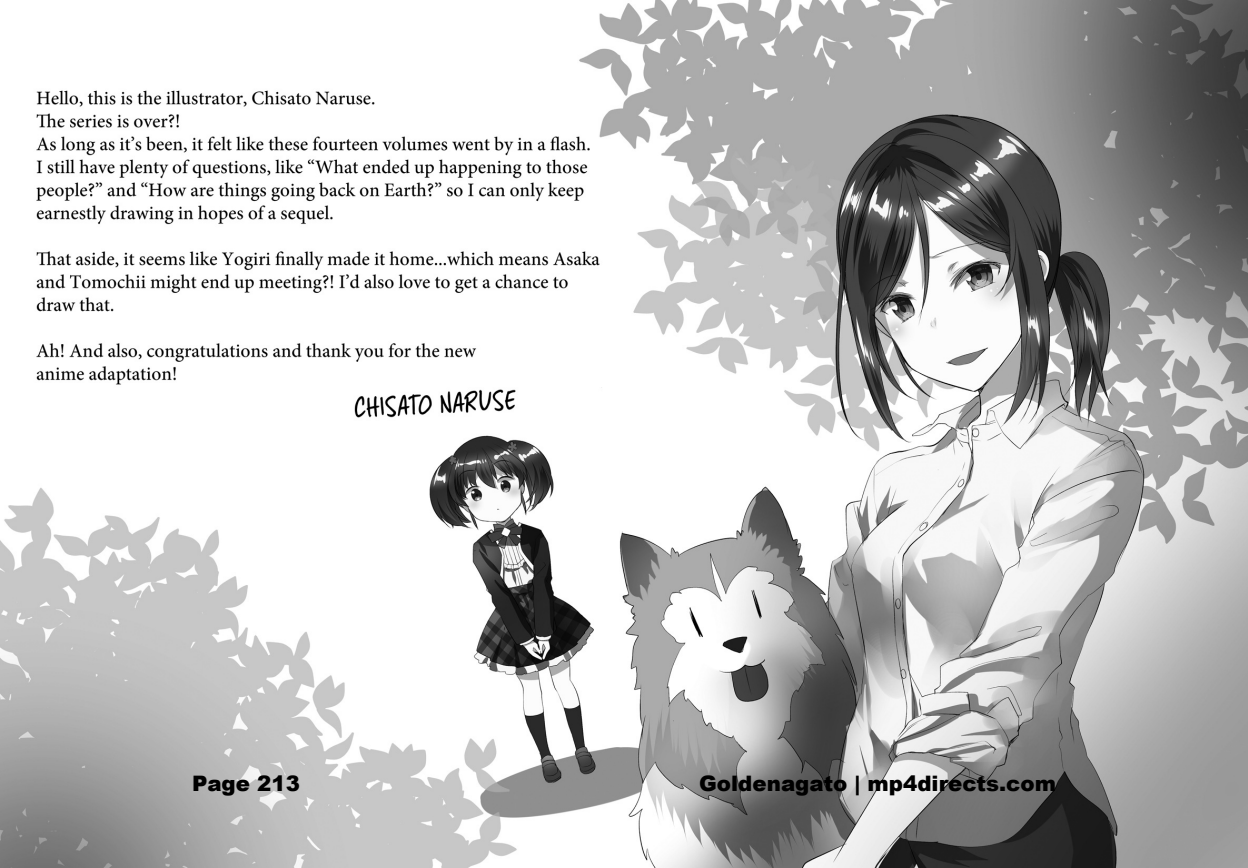
Hello, this is the illustrator, Chisato Naruse.
The series is over?!
As long as it's been, it felt like these fourteen volumes went by in a flash. I still have plenty of questions, like "What ended up happening to those people?" and "How are things going back on Earth?" so I can only keep earnestly drawing in hopes of a sequel.

That aside, it seems like Yogiri finally made it home...which means Asaka and Tomochii might end up meeting?! I'd also love to get a chance to draw that.

Ah! And also, congratulations and thank you for the new anime adaptation!

CHISATO NARUSE



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Bonus Short Story

Tomochika: Okay, hello! I'm Tomochika Dannoura, and this is Question Corner 9! Looks like we made it all the way to the last volume!
Mokomoko: *By the way, this is the real Question Corner for this volume. Normally, this is included as part of the main volume, but instead we took that opportunity to discuss the upcoming anime adaptation!*
Tomochika: So, are there actually any questions left?
Mokomoko: *It certainly appears so.*
Tomochika: Also, Earth Star Novels is collecting questions on Twitter for their own segment, which is separate from the Question Corner, so please take a look there as well!
Mokomoko: *It is featured on their page...somewhere. If you view their website, you should be able to find it. Probably!*
Tomochika: I know that sounds kind of fishy, but as of this writing, it hasn't been posted yet!
Mokomoko: *Let us finish off the rest of our questions here! Please understand that our answers will be very shoddy, as we have little time!*
Tomochika: I feel like our introduction took up an awful lot of that time too. Maybe we shouldn't have bothered...

Q: Aside from those killed by Yogiri, it was said in the story that when gods die, they eventually come back to life on their own. But what happens if a god is killed by someone who steals their authority, as happened a few times in the story?

Riru Nagadou

Mokomoko: *They come back anyway!*

Q: I have a question for Mokomoko. Before, you mentioned that you strictly select those who are allowed to enter the Dannoura bloodline and that Yogiri would pass that test. But what about Daimon Hanakawa? Does he have a chance? If he does, please let him know.

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Akakishichi

Mokomoko: *Zero percent!*

Q: When Yogiri was sent to the other world, were groups like the Agency celebrating or terrified?

kimutimuti

Mokomoko: *If you read the volume already, I am sure you know, but they were not even aware that the young man had left!*

Q: By the way, I know Yogiri dealt with Aggressors that appeared on Earth from other worlds very easily, but how is Earth doing without him?

Nagamo~

Mokomoko: *I'm sure they figured something out.*
Tomochika: Can you please at least try to answer?!
Yogiri: Aggressors don't show up on Earth all that often. Even if they did, there are plenty of strong people there to deal with them.
Tomochika: And like Mokomoko said in the previous question, basically no time passed on Earth while we were gone, so there was no chance for anything like that to happen.

Q: Before going to the other world, did Yogiri have any friends? And how many people does he feel comfortable around now? Also, does Tomochika have any stories of fights she lost back on Earth?

Kanraru

Yogiri: Friends? No one in my school, I guess. I tried to avoid connecting with people. There are a few people I can let my guard down around, though.
Tomochika: The second part was for me, right? I haven't lost to anyone I'd think of as an enemy before. Of course, I got beat up all the time by grandpa while training.
Mokomoko: *That is the most we can answer in our limited space! If your question was not included, then I apologize!*
Tomochika: So, that marks the last entry in this weird section outside of time and space! Though...you never know, I might show up somewhere else!

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Mokomoko: *And I suppose I would appear alongside her!*
Tomochika: Pretty sure we won't need you once we're back home!
Mokomoko: *What?!*
Yogiri: Bye.
Tomochika: Thank you for sticking with us all this time!

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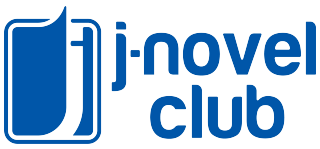

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My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me! Volume 14
by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

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Edited by Tess Nanavati

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